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Chapter 1: Petter

Petter wakes up early as usual and goes down to the cat, Tore-Martin. If you think that's a strange name for a cat, just ask why he chose it. Chances are he doesn't remember; his parents had given him the responsibility when he was 5 years old.

"They can't complain, after all, I got a pretty generic name. So even at 5, I was more inventive than they were," he would probably have said. Sarcasm comes easily to him, but the tone reveals that he doesn't mean to be rude. It's humour he finds amusing, although many would likely raise an eyebrow.

Tore-Martin knows what to do and leads his friend to the bench where the cat food is. After he has received his reward for all the foot rubs, I look out of the window. It is late and deer are visiting the housing estate, but they will soon disappear into the woods. I stand and watch them for a while, and sure enough, the herd wanders off. One thing is certain, I like animals much more than people. Not that I dislike people, but I get a bit mentally exhausted from too much exposure.

Petter goes up to his room and closes the door; his parents haven't woken up yet. He turns on the desktop PC he has fixed himself. It's the IT world's version of a vintage car, but in its day, it was a powerful machine. After a few seconds, the machine boots up with a Linux-based operating system. Down in the right corner, the date and time are displayed: 16.08.2192 at 3:16. Perhaps it's not surprising that the "oldies" are still asleep, Petter thinks. It doesn't matter; I'll see if any friends are online. There's a good chance since one of them lives in the USA.

Indeed, it looks like a Caroline from Florida is awake, always nice to chat with her.

Petter: "Hey Caroline, how's it going in 2024 these days?"

Caroline: "Oh dear. I'm worried about how things might develop, especially if populists with conspiracy theories come to power. They've started with the nonsense that vaccines cause autism. Might as well find something positive to talk about, like the first time we met. I was very sceptical about the possibility of communicating across different time periods. But I don't regret for a second my gut feeling that you were telling the truth. Even though I still believe time is like a river.

After that, the conversation shifts, a lot of small talk about pets. All the funny things animals can do just because they can, and not caring what their owner might think. After half an hour, the conversation is over for now.

Petter had received input that made him think a bit, but the thoughts quickly vanished as he continued his Minecraft gaming. He had set up a dedicated Minecraft server that had been running for 2 years now.

There are a few retro gamers in the world, and Petter is one of them.

The day goes as usual with the regular routines he has made a habit of.

That night lasted long, filled with dreams of a river leading him helplessly to unknown areas. Was it Caroline's comment that influenced him, or is it his subconscious trying to tell him something? Petter thought as he woke up, but soon after, the thoughts were gone. A bit like they had never existed; that's often how dreams are. A perishable commodity with a shelf life of minutes or seconds.

Petter gets up and remembers to brush his teeth, which is often forgotten unless his mother reminds him. So feeling a bit pleased, he goes down to the kitchen.

Kathrine: Hey, my little darling, would you like a slice of cheese and ham?

Petter: "Sure"

Mum knows that from the tone, it means yes this time, but "sure" can also mean no. Dad has asked Petter before if "sure" means both yes and no. But he got no answer, just a look that passed like a breeze over his shoulders. Neither a warm summer breeze nor a cold winter gust, not even a middle ground. Petter is just like that with his family; it's when he can be his true self. A boy who is social when he feels like it or when the situation calls for it.

Mum sees that he has remembered to brush his teeth today, but says nothing about the toothpaste in the corner of his mouth.

Kathrine: "So when do you start work today? Is Tove working with you today?"

Petter: "I start at 16:00, that's quite possible. I don't keep track of everyone."

Petter wasn't lying to his mother; it is true that he doesn't keep track of everyone. But he also doesn't want to admit that he has a secret crush. In his mind, his mother knows nothing about this, while a mother might have an instinct for such things. Well, many women like to think so, so we can call it "plausible fact".

Petter usually cycles the 12 kilometres to work, mostly along forests and fields. Only in the last 2 kilometres do larger buildings start to appear. Just before the nursing home, there is a bridge; when he sees it, he knows he has 5 minutes left. Today, he left a bit earlier because he had a "good" idea of what he wanted to do.

Where the bridge ends, there is a small railing and grass that slopes down to the lake. Petter walks along the edge until he reaches a small peninsula about 4 metres in diameter. He collects stones the size of a fist, which he arranges in the shape of a heart. In the middle, he writes TOVE in large letters. He just managed to finish and still get to work on time. This was unusually well planned, he thought to himself.

He changes into work clothes and enters the department; the meeting hasn't started yet. It looks like everyone has arrived on time. A brief overview of how the day has been and what is new.

Everyone who lives here needs a lot of help, even though technology can do much for the body. We still haven't found a solution for the mind, which is slowly but surely degrading. When the average age is 130 years, it has a downside. Petter has always thought he doesn't want to live that long. Giving up part of one's autonomy seems frightening, a sacrifice for one's own mind. But he wants to make life as good as

possible for them. Most light up when they see young people at work, as if they gain a little extra energy. Or perhaps they feel that young people have a more relaxed demeanor.

During the break, Petter talks to Tove

Petter: "What do you think about the concept of time?"

Tove chuckles a bit and says: "Are you in a philosophical mood today?"

The elderly often say that time just goes faster with age. I think it has something to do with ratios."

Petter: "Yes, that makes sense. A 130-year-old has experienced about 46,021 days of memories, subtracting the early years of life. So one day out of 46,021 will seem short, while for us it becomes about one day out of 5,844 days. Already, the days seem longer than when I was 10 years old."

Tove: "I haven't calculated that, but it probably holds true enough, and I agree with what you said last. So what do you think?"

Petter: "I believe time is the same everywhere in the universe. A little thought experiment to illustrate this: You can teleport over great distances. You also have telescopes that can see the surface of Proxima Centauri B. You set up the equipment and teleport to where the telescope shows. The trip took you one second, you wave for a few minutes and travel back. You wait just over 4 years, then you look in the telescope and see your 4-year younger self waving at you. In my mind, that seems logical."

Tove: "What made you think of this?"

Petter: "Someone said that time is like a river, that it flows in one direction. And that might be a cliché. But I haven't heard of this cliché, so I find it a bit strange."

Tove: "I haven't heard that term either, but people say a lot of odd things."

The break ended shortly after, and the rest of the day went as usual. I can't mention too much about the patients' names and conditions, in case I breach future confidentiality.

Petter stands outside the building, waiting for Tove to finish changing. In 2 minutes, she comes walking towards him.

Petter: "I thought we could walk together until the roads split."

Tove: "Yes, we can do that next time, but today I'm staying over at a friend's place in the city centre, since I have to be up early for work tomorrow."

Petter: "Okay. I completely understand, it's nice to have a short distance at 7:00 in the morning. We'll talk, bye."

Petter was a bit disappointed that he didn't get to show what he had made. But he now knows that Tove will be at work early in the morning and finish at 15:00.

The next day, Petter gets up a bit later than usual; Tore-Martin has made confetti out of the kitchen roll.

Petter: "Hey Tore-Martin, it's probably not going to be a girlfriend any time soon, so you could have saved yourself the preparations."

Tore-Martin: "Brrruuuuh??"

Petter: "Yes, yes... you shall have food for your efforts."

After breakfast, Petter goes up to his room; it has been a while since he

last spoke with Kristian. He lives in 2024 and won't say where he comes from. He is what people in that time would call a conspiracy theorist and is quite sceptical of the authorities and much else. Petter finds it refreshing to write to him, despite the fact that he can be rude and cheeky. But these are traits that Petter hasn't seen in his world. So from a psychological perspective, it's quite fascinating.

Petter: "Hey Kristian. It's been a while since we last spoke. Has there been any further development regarding the things you talked about last time?"

Kristian: "Oh, it's Mr Future. I still believe God created the universe, and the fact that they haven't found a better solution than the Big Bang Theory for almost 200 years is just sad. But what is beyond the universe's boundaries?"

Petter: "We still don't know what lies beyond the observable universe; one theory is the idea of a multiverse."

Kristian: "I can like that idea; heaven and hell could be separate universes, and God exists outside of that. What do you think of that idea?"

Petter: "My theory is the idea of non-existence. Imagine for example, Minecraft. In the beginning, the game generates a world; eventually, you explore near the edge of this world. Where there was no data is now generated by the game; before that happened, there was "non-existence." So the universe expands into "non-existence," there could be infinite "non-existence" just as numbers are infinite. The universe's expansion into non-existence allows for potential infinite expansion. On the other hand, the universe could perhaps collapse into an extremely black hole, and then the Big Bang happens again. No one will ever know how many times this has happened. Perhaps the void that the previous universe had remains, since dimensions without mass are more than non-existence. What do you think about that, Kristian?"

Kristian: "Most idiotic idea I've heard in a long time!"

After that, the message closes, and the user is listed as inactive. Petter finds this response very unexpected and wonders what he did wrong. He has always been factual and polite, even when Kristian was not. Petter felt guilty without really understanding why, and had many questions without obvious logical answers. This is how the mind works for Petter, constantly analysing a reality that often seems confusing. If only everyone were as easy to understand as Tore-Martin.

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Tore-Martin is lying on the light blue sofa on a wool rug, his mother has trained him to lie there. Petter sits down beside him and strokes him. Tore-Martin begins to purr, and Petter feels his own body start to relax as well. After a while, his mother comes in.

Kathrine: "Hello, my little darling. Could you tidy up a bit in the attic? It's getting quite full up there. Maybe see if there's anything that can be thrown away; your father has sentimental value for just about everything. But the boxes that come from your great-grandfather we can probably go through. After 100 years, there's likely something that will never be used."

Petter: "Sure, I don't have anything else to do, and a bit of alone time in

the attic sounds nice.”

“The attic” is really just floorboards screwed to the rafters in the garage. A square opening is at the opposite end of the garage door, and an aluminium ladder leans against the wall. Not exactly top design or solution, but good enough to stash away old things out of sight. It’s probably not the only family in Norway that thinks future relatives will surely be able to use it. Or the “it’s almost too crazy to throw it away” argument, which is hard to contradict when sentimental value is part of the equation.

Petter climbs up the ladder and switches on the light. It’s stacked full of plastic boxes with various things along the walls. On the floor, there’s a fair amount of dried faeces and cat hair; it looks like the neighbour’s cats have been here over the winter. This is going to take a few hours, Petter thinks, but the first step is probably to sweep away the presents left by the neighbour’s cats. I can interpret it as the empire of Tore-Kristian has finally come to an end, and the barbarians have now had free rein.

After a bit of tedious cleaning, it was time for the boxes. Some could just be thrown away; there was no need to go through them at all. Clothes that had gone mouldy must have been of poor quality on the duct tape. If Mythbusters had used it to make a raft, they would have quickly been swimming with the sharks.

Finally, Petter finds a large Pelicase filled with books, assuming that the owner of these books wanted to preserve them. Books have always sparked an interest in Petter, especially those with English titles. And judging by the titles, they don’t seem to be fiction. “The Selfish Gene” by Dawkins, “How the Mind Works” by Pinker, “Thinking, Fast and Slow” by Kahneman, and “Brave New World” by Huxley.

Petter takes the books into the house after tidying up and walks over to his mother.

Petter: “Mum, I found these books; they look quite old. Have you read them?”

Kathrine: “No. I haven’t looked in the boxes; that’s your father’s side of the family. I don’t think he’s read them either. The books have probably been in the attic for quite some time.”

Petter: “Okay. Do you think I can keep them?”

Kathrine: “You can certainly keep them, but just check with your father.”

After Petter has asked his father, who had no problem with it. After all, if the boy wanted to learn something from a book, a good father wouldn’t say no to that. Perhaps not exactly what was said, but the essence is there. Petter’s father does not wish to be referenced in this book, nor give readers an impression of who he is as a person.

Petter takes the books up to his room and sits down in front of the computer. “I’ll look up the titles and see what critics think of them,” Petter thinks. Since it would help him decide which book to start with. He types in “The Selfish Gene” and no results come up, then searches for the author. No, that didn’t yield any results either. “Strange?! Perhaps this Richard Dawkins is a pseudoscientist and thus just forgotten by history.” While Petter has his quiet thoughts swirling, he

types in the next title followed by the author. And to his great surprise, all these books and authors are not part of historical literature. "Now this is starting to almost seem like a mystery. Coincidence is often a simple event; several events form a pattern. The only logical action now would be to read these books. Thus, perhaps find out why they are not mentioned anywhere. An alternative would, of course, be to ask my friends from the times when these books were written." His mouth moves like a mill even though no sound comes out of Petter's mouth. Petter sees that it's getting late, and the mystery will have to wait until tonight. For now, it's just before Tove finishes her workday. Petter gets on his DBS bike that he fixed up, the one he found at his grandmother's. It must have been sitting in the boathouse for a long time, but he managed to remove the corrosion and give it a new colour. The bike is missing the bar in the middle, which may have been modern when it was made. In any case, it's very practical since Petter is a bit clumsy, so a bar is not something he misses.

The bike ride goes without anything exciting to report, unless you enjoy descriptions of nature and birdlife. But then it becomes a lot of factual information about the different bird species and what makes these particular ones special. Petter cycles past the workplace and positions himself a little way off. He knows roughly when Tove will come out and start her walk home, so he will come cycling in the same direction by chance. "Nothing can go wrong with this plan; I've thought out what I'm going to say. And I'm fairly sure of what she's going to say." with a smile on his face and his heart beating a little faster than usual.

Petter begins to cycle slowly back, seeing a girl with long light hair and a height of about 1.6m walking in the right direction. "99% chance that this is Tove strolling calmly along, I recognise her walk from a distance. All the little details that I find sweet. But these thoughts are a secret even to her; I've learned that not everything should be said. It's a bit too easy to say the wrong things."

Petter comes up beside Tove just after he has thought these strange thoughts.

Petter: "Hi Tove. It seems that fate has us going in the same direction. I just came from the centre; if you want, we can walk together until our paths diverge."

Tove: "Hi Petter. Of course, it's always nice to have some company."

They walk calmly along the road, and Petter tells her about the books he found today. After a little while, they come to the bridge, where some ducks are swimming nearby where Petter had arranged the stones. This must be fate, a perfect situation to get her to look in that direction.

Petter points and says: "Looks like those ducks are enjoying the day, probably a couple."

Tove: "Either that or maybe brothers; they both have green heads."

Petter: "You have a good eye for details; I didn't notice that."

Tove: "I noticed something else in the same vein."

Tove has a sly smile that Petter doesn't notice. She has a suspicion of who and why, so now she's going to tease Petter a bit.

Petter: "Oh, what then? I don't see anything unusual about those ducks."

Tove: "So you didn't notice that someone has written my name with round stones, and a heart around it."

Petter: "No, I haven't seen it from this angle; where is it?"

Petter doesn't like to lie, and technically he hasn't seen it from that angle. So he's perhaps in a grey area, but it's not really a lie.

Tove points and says: "Maybe it's my friend; I thought we were just friends. But maybe she has other feelings."

Petter: "...I didn't know you liked both girls and boys. But I can understand that it's possible; I've liked a person of the same gender myself. But I found out it was platonic when he kissed me. The line between liking someone very much and sexual attraction can be hard to distinguish. That's my experience..

In 1992, sexual preferences are not categorised into boxes that define people. People don't judge others for who they fall for. Personality is part of the mind and is like another universe ready to explore. And even after a long life together, one will not have uncovered everything that is.

Tove: "Yes. Maybe so; I actually prefer boys. Although most of my relationships have been with girls."

Petter: "Maybe you haven't found your soulmate yet; when you find that person, I think it won't matter whether it's a girl or a boy."

Tove: "I don't think it's my friend who made it, but that the person is nearby."

Petter understands what she means and feels his face getting warm. Words start to become hard to find, and the sentences in his head don't make sense. Even though he had practised the conversation, he was thrown off by the situation. Like a magnetic iron curtain that destroyed what was stored in the biological computer we call the brain. Petter concludes that the only way out is to tell her how he feels. Tove doesn't have such feelings yet, but she has an open mind. After all, she finds Petter a bit different from other people in her life. In many ways, Petter thinks like a child, with his many questions and innocent curiosity. Petter goes home with many thoughts in his head, a bit anxious about what she really feels. Whether he has embarrassed himself or said a lot of silly things.

Chapter 2: Kristian

Everyone knows someone who is referred to as a problem child, but few know why they became one. It's easy to blame the environment, as the idea that we are born with a blank slate is seductive. No one is born with negative personal traits; everything is learned or can be traced back to the environment the individual is exposed to. But an interplay between genetics and environment is more likely, and the reason there is no clear answer is due to individual differences. Some personal traits can be amplified or suppressed by the environment. But that doesn't mean that a person will react the same way as others with similar experiences or seemingly similar personalities. Psychology is good at categorising people into boxes, but I believe such rough sorting has a relatively high margin of error. Kristian's future girlfriend will refer to him as her project, and she works in psychiatry. People are complex, and it's not any more difficult than that. 2016 is the year Kristian got to join the military service. The only

positive aspect of this is the opportunity to shoot weapons, maybe even try out some military vehicles. “Everything could be good if it weren’t for conformity and idiotic routines,” Kristian thinks as he rings the doorbell at his friends’ place. He and his friends have the weekend off and are going on a trip to Denmark. But before that... it’s peace pipe followed by some pints.

The door opens, and Geddi stands in the doorway with slightly red eyes. His mother is sure it’s due to pollen allergies. She’s not entirely wrong; it is plant-related.

“You’re a bit late; Roffa smoked the bone,” says Geddi with a crooked smile.

“I wouldn’t have made it here before Roffa anyway,” replies Kristian, rolling his eyes.

“Fair enough,” laughs Geddi. “Janki and Roffa are already here. Come in, your majesty.”

Kristian follows Geddi up to the loft lounge, which is separate from the rest of the house. It’s an extension with its own entrance. Geddi’s father made it as a “grumpy room,” but now that he’s divorced and has a younger lady, only Geddi and his mother live there. A perfect little hideaway for the youth who keep a relatively low profile. The other two are well settled in the beanbags from the 90s, playing something on the Xbox 360. Perhaps not the latest in 2016, but it still works well.

“There’s a little piece of black Moroccan on the table. You handle the rest,” says Roffa as he leans back and takes a sip from his pint.

Kristian doesn’t respond but walks over to the table and sits down on a worn kitchen chair. Most of the stuff in this den is old furniture and wall decorations that have gone out of style. In the spirit of “12 Rules for Grumpy Rooms” – I wonder if someone will write such a book! – Kristian thinks as he takes out a Lucky Strike, breaks off the filter, removes the paper, chops up the tobacco, warms the little piece, and mixes it well. He then rolls a joint ready for use.

“That was quick; I’m ready for a round,” says Roffa, his eyes sparkling with anticipation.

“You know what the saying is: ‘Makers take,’” says Kristian as he lights up, while the smell of tobacco and Moroccan hash fills the room.

After a few pints and some multiplayer gaming, which Geddi naturally wins. Everyone blames him for always having the original controller while they have to use the cheap copy from Madcatz. But I think it’s more likely that none of the others have an Xbox 360 and that he plays quite a lot. The atmosphere is light, and the accusations don’t cut deep. Roffa takes responsibility and calls a taxi; otherwise, they would definitely miss the ferry to Denmark. Much of the trip and stay is standard “guys on tour” in a foreign country, so we’ll skip a thorough description. The return journey, however, was not without its challenges.

Kristian: “Just head to the boat; I’ll just pop into the shop and buy something for the hip flask.”

The trio heads back, while the joker card has other plans.

“I’ll probably have time for a quick stop at the shop for beer and snacks, so I’ll just throw everything in the shopping basket. What could possibly go wrong? The simplest plan so far,” Kristian thinks as he walks into the

shop.

He picks up a Jäger and two packs of beer, goes to the checkout, and pays. When he comes out of the shop, he looks at the clock and realises he is running very late. Luckily, it's downhill, so he gets a brilliant idea. Most people would say it's not a brilliant idea but bordering on idiocy. On the other hand, it's the day after, so thinking rationally isn't exactly his strong suit right now. Kristian runs down the street with the shopping basket in front of him, then places his feet on the stage. This is just before the slope begins. The thought is a little ride down the hill since he will definitely achieve better speed. Not only that, but he avoids having to come out to the guys.

"This is genius move number 1 on the trip!" Kristian shouts as the speed continues to increase. The front wheels are shaking faster and faster back and forth, still on a direct course towards the quay. But then Kristian sees what skaters really dislike, roadworks where the asphalt has yet to be laid. "Fuck, I don't remember it being like this when we walked up." Kristian now has a bit too much speed to just jump off, so before he can think of an alternative solution, the wheels hit the gravel. It ends, of course, with an uncontrolled fall, and Kristian flies a few metres and hits his head. Unsure how long he lay there before a passerby came over and asked the classic questions. Kristian is now conscious and says he has to hurry to catch the ferry. The passerby says it left the quay about 5 minutes ago. Panic begins to creep down his spine; how is he going to get to the military camp by Monday? It's not like he has a ticket for the next ferry or money for that matter. Thoughts race through Kristian's head, so the pain is temporarily forgotten.

The most sensible thing would have been to call mum, so she could transfer some money. The downside is that I would hear about it for a long time. I can almost hear her voice: "Why can't you take a little responsibility for your life? It's not that hard to be on time for once. Blah blah blah, nag nag nag." Nope! Completely out of the question.

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Kristian takes out his mobile and checks if there are any truck stops or rest areas nearby. With a bit of luck, there's a lorry heading towards Sweden, and perhaps further to Norway. Kristian sees that there is something nearby, but it would mean almost 3 hours of walking. He retrieves his backpack from the shopping trolley; fortunately, he hadn't bought any glass bottles. So the goods had survived the trip down the hill. He walks slowly up the hill towards the shop, and as he approaches, he sees that a cyclist has just arrived at the shop. This is, after all, a country where quite a few people cycle, and it's not exactly the most challenging terrain for long-distance cycling. On his way, he inputs the route into Google Maps and sees that cycling would take just over an hour.

Lucky that the guy hasn't locked his bike; that probably means he'll be out soon. Kristian takes the bike and hops on, pedalling as fast as he can and taking the first turn he sees. He'll find the right road after a little while. The most important thing is to create as much distance as possible and stay away from the main roads as much as he can. This is the first time Kristian has stolen anything at all; the adrenaline is quite helpful. A sort of high spreads through his brain as a result of the

adrenaline kick. Time flew by, and before he knew it, Kristian spotted the truck stop. He hadn't really thought much while cycling; it was more like when men are out on a fishing trip.

A 40-year-old man is sitting on a bench near the lorry, having his lunch. Kristian cycles over to him.

"Hey mate. Are you the one driving the Swedish-registered lorry?"

The guy nods and continues eating his sandwich with liver pâté and beetroot.

"I had an accident on my bike; I went straight over the handlebars when I was cycling down to the ferry. By the time I came to, the ferry had already left the dock. If it's possible to get a lift to Sweden, I'll hop off as close to Norway as possible. I don't have any money, but I'm a bit desperate to get home. You see, I need to be back at the military camp by Monday. I'm willing to give you my bike as payment; it cost a fair bit. I'm sure you can sell it in Sweden or give it to someone you know."

The guy finishes his sandwich, wipes his hairy mouth, and says: "Hmm, so you've been on a bender in Denmark, I can smell it from a mile away." He studies Kristian from head to toe, a bit sceptical as he assesses this unfamiliar young man. "Well, you look like someone who can lift a bit as well. Fine, you can have a ride if you help with loading/unloading, and I'll also accept your offer. Does that sound like a deal?" Kristian puts on his best poker face and plays the bewildered duckling. "Absolutely fine, the most important thing for me is to get home, then get to the camp."

Kristian sits on the bench next to the driver and takes a sip of water from his bottle. "Thanks, I really appreciate it," he says with a calm smile. "I can help with loading and unloading, no problem." The driver nods and stands up. "Good, we have quite a bit to do before we can leave. Let's get started." They walk over to the lorry, and Kristian helps load the last of the goods. He lifts heavy boxes with ease, and the driver seems impressed by his strength and work ethic. "You're strong, mate," the driver says as they work. "What's your name, by the way?"

"Ronny," he replies shortly. "And you?" "I'm Lars," says the driver, extending his hand. Kristian takes it and gives a firm handshake. After an hour of work, the lorry is ready, and they get into the cab. Lars starts the engine, and they begin their journey towards Sweden. Kristian looks out of the window and feels a wave of relief. He is one step closer to getting home. After 2 hours filled with various theories from Lars, Kristian is nearly sore in his neck and smile muscles. He has been nodding along to be polite, thinking roughly the opposite of what he responded. Not to mention noticing all the little flaws in the less-than-attractive face. "It'll be nice to arrive and not have to listen to this guy. What he deserves is to be caught for smuggling. Unlikely, but it would be amusing. I'd love to be a fly on the wall then." As he drifts off while watching the landscape whizz by.

After what felt like an eternity, they arrive in Karlstad.

Lars stops at a red traffic light and points in the direction while saying:

"It's just as well you hop off here; it's not far to the bus or train station."

Kristian opens the door and jumps out of the car: "Likewise.. have a nice trip, you Swedish bastard." Followed by a little wink and a crooked

smile. He then closes the door and walks in the direction Lars indicated. It's not that far from Sørlandet to Karlstad, I'll surely get Roffa to come and pick me up. He takes out his mobile and calls; after a short while, Roffa answers.

"Where the hell have you been? We were sitting in the sky bar waiting as planned."

Kristian briefly explains what had happened and that he's stuck in Karlstad.

"Yeah, I actually had money to buy a new ticket, but in my head, I didn't. It would have been a waste of money that could be used for other things. I know it's a long drive for you; it'll be about 12 hours in total. I can drive the route back, and in the meantime, I'll probably manage to buy something for the evening. I have 6 hours to find a sweet brother with some weed; it's a bit cold out."

A brief pause followed by a sigh: "Yeah, fine, I'll come; just make sure it's worth the trip. I'm done with military service, so it's good to have a bit while you're away."

Kristian feels relieved by the response, and the conversation continues on other topics. The call ends with them agreeing to talk later when Roffa gets closer to Karlstad.

You might think that Kristian seeks out immigrant youth and asks about ganja, brown, green, and whatever Wikipedia says the street names for cannabis are. It's probably still sold this way. But I believe Kristian used social media and encrypted messaging apps. After all, he is part of the generation that grew up with this.

Kristian arranges to meet someone who calls himself "Fleinar" who has some hash to sell. The message with instructions arrives shortly after. He needs to go to an address towards Tomrestad, and on the way, he will see some terraced houses. In the corner of the yard, there's a mailbox stand; inside mailbox number 256 will be the agreed amount of grams. Kristian retrieves the 10g chocolate bar and puts the money inside the box. Kristian knows this is to keep it discreet; he also knows that the mailbox probably doesn't belong to Fleinar.

Kristian chuckles to himself after reading the message. "Fleinar, huh, 100% chance the guy's name is Einar and that he takes magic mushrooms. His friends must have given him this nickname at some point, which became his alternative identity," he thought. He smiled as he remembered his own story. Not that he liked his nickname very much. "Murer." It had started when he, at 16, had brought some of his father's homebrew to a party. The bottles with the long necks from the 80s, which his father had saved and reused for his home-produced beer, had been a topic of conversation. One of the partygoers had pointed out that these bottles were called "murer." Kristian had never managed to shake off the nickname. While Fleinar embraced his alias with pride, Kristian felt a certain irritation over his own.

Kristian finally finds the address and the mailbox, having followed the instructions to the letter. After that, he wandered around the town, had a small lunch at a local café. The 6 hours passed relatively quickly, and he had almost forgotten that Roffa was supposed to call. Kristian takes out his mobile and answers:

“Hey Roffa, can you pick me up at the bus station? I’m heading that way while we talk.”

“Okay. I’ll put it into Google Maps, and I’ll be there shortly.”

Kristian is now back at the bus station, keeping an eye out for a blue Audi. After a few minutes of waiting, Roffa drives into the bus bay. He opens the door and gets out.

“Here are the keys; it was a long drive, not exactly the most exciting thing that happened today. What about you? Did you manage to sort out the things you needed?” Roffa says with hope in his voice.

“Of course, did you expect anything else?” with a smile and a wink at his friend.

“I think I’ll need to make a little Jonas in the loo, then it’ll be cowboy stretch on the way back,” is Roffa’s response.

Kristian breaks off a small piece in his pocket; he’s had good practice at this. He places the piece inside the cigarette pack. He then takes the pack out and hands it to Roffa. Roffa goes into the toilet and rolls himself a joint. He comes out to the car where Kristian is ready behind the wheel, waiting. After Roffa gets in the car, they head towards the border, and as they get onto the country road, Roffa takes out his joint. It looks a bit like Elon Musk’s rockets. It’s very pointed at the end, in case anyone hasn’t seen his rockets.

“Ah, that was good shit; looks like he had quality. Not like that party where everyone got sick; it tasted almost like petrol. Wouldn’t surprise me if someone had smuggled it in the tank of a car. It ruined the whole cabin trip, and the lady was furious.” Roffa thinks but doesn’t say it out loud. Kristian was at that party, so there’s no need to remind him of it. As they approach the border, Roffa suddenly says, having been relatively quiet until now.

“I had a good idea; what if I jump out a bit before the border? Then I’ll run with the stuff through the woods. You drive through customs and pick me up on the other side. That way, we won’t risk getting caught for smuggling. Not that it’s so bloody much that we’d get a long sentence, but it’s nice to avoid the stress anyway.”

Kristian looks at Roffa in disbelief before he says:

“Either that hash is stronger than I thought, or you haven’t thought this through well enough. If anyone saw it, they might find it strange behaviour. And you never know how people react to odd behaviour. Maybe a concern report to the cops is an option they might choose. No, I think the risk is lower by just driving through; fortunately, it’s sunny, so just put on your sunglasses and relax. But most importantly, just keep quiet if anyone wants to talk to us. I can easily come across as atypically healthy Norwegian youth; I have the looks to match.”

Roffa thinks it over and nods in agreement.

But what would happen if Roffa’s idea was executed?

Kari and Gunnar, both 68, have been to Systembolaget and shopped. Kari has been nagging Gunnar the whole trip, but after 30 years of marriage, he has a filter for that. He wasn’t allowed to stop for snus because Kari wanted to get home to their cats. If they had stopped at the petrol station, Kari wouldn’t have seen Roffa running through the woods. Instead, the car behind with the youths would have seen it, and

they wouldn't have cared. As Kari and Gunnar approach the border, they see a blue car stopping by the roadside. A young man runs towards the woods and disappears into the forest.

"Did you see that, Gunnar! Probably a drug bastard trying to smuggle drugs. I'm reporting it to the police."

Gunnar just sighs as he thinks, "Just a few decades left, and then it's straight to the eternal hunting grounds for me. I'll ask God if she can be the deer." He then replies: "Go ahead; you'll probably feel better about it." While he smiles, not for what he said but rather for what he thought.

Kristian and Roffa drive through customs; they weren't stopped this time. "Fate has been kind to me since Denmark, or is it Karma that's the cause? No, I don't believe in such things; it's probably that reality consists of chaos and order. And this time, chaos had been on my side."

Kristian thought as his heart began to pump a little slower now. Now that they were on the Norwegian side of the border, the rest of the drive would surely be smooth sailing. It was already 22:15, and the sun was setting; Kristian began to feel in his body that it had been a long day.

There was still a lot of traffic in the opposite lane, and he sees a lorry in the distance. "What if we drive into the opposite lane and crash into the lorry? Then you won't have to get up early and end it all." said a voice in Kristian's head. "What a sick idea, and where did that come from? I wonder if I should stop at a petrol station and buy a Pepsi Max. Maybe a bit of caffeine will get rid of such unwanted thoughts." After that consideration, Kristian tells Roffa that he needs a little stop and buys a drink at the same time. Roffa, who had smoked a joint on the way, now really craved something sweet and salty. "Great idea, Kristian; could you buy a bag of Smash, a Coke, and a bag of Turkish pepper?"

Kristian nods and continues driving to the nearest petrol station.

After a quick stop, the journey continues, with Roffa very pleased with his choices. He starts talking about the history of Smash, something he's definitely just made up. "Do you know how Smash was invented?"

Roffa asks, knowing that Kristian won't know. "No, Roffa! But I feel like a history lesson is on the way." Kristian's voice sounds uninterested and tired, not that it will stop Roffa even if he were sober. "Montezuma II, who was an Aztec emperor, loved chocolate but had eaten so much that he wanted a bit of a change. His servants were tasked with making some chocolate pieces with different flavours. Tomatillo, avocado, papaya, nopal, mango, and jujube were tried. Montezuma was not impressed; it was too sweet and ruined the good dark chocolate. He got angry and hit one of them over the head with a club. Gunnar, whom the natives called the farmer with the corn hat, was lucky; the hat was like a helmet. But a piece flew off and landed in the chocolate pot. Later, Montezuma received this piece along with the chocolate. He liked the taste and pondered how corn had gotten in there. When he figured it out, he had the cook make many of these delicious pieces. He called it Smash for obvious reasons. Blah blah blah...." One story after another came in a row, and finally, they arrived at Roffa's apartment.

"Do you want to come in for a nightcap?" Kristian politely declines his friend, saying he has to get up early to return to the military camp.

"Roffa is an incredibly nice friend, but like with chocolate, it's best not to eat too much. All this talk about chocolate made him think of chocolate." Kristian thinks as he walks calmly down the street.

I won't go into too much detail about Kristian and his friends' lives.

2018-2022 will now be summarised briefly. Kristian completed his military service and was never caught for smoking hash at night while on guard at the gate. Thus, he never learned discipline, which was perhaps the point of the military. Geddi and Janki moved to Bergen to study, and eventually, they cut all contact. New friends and girlfriends tend to turn childhood friends into distant acquaintances. Kristian and Roffa became more connected to a criminal environment to obtain hash. Eventually, this led them to try harder drugs, offered and recommended by their new "friends." From their perspective, new users were a financial resource that could be exploited to fund their own use. The duo had probably tried everything possible, and Roffa was a bit more eager to experiment. As often in such environments, death is not uncommon; the man with the scythe came riding and took Roffa. That tragic day, he ended his life alone in the gutters. This was a wake-up call for Kristian, who had lost his only friend.

A few days have passed; Kristian is sitting on his parents' veranda. He has been staying with them these days. Being alone felt too heavy, and his thoughts had been affected by the incident.

"The sound of planes in the distance, the eternal hum of cars seeking their destination. The landscape divided by cultivated fields and houses. Small hills clad in trees rise over the uneven terrain. The lawn with its traces of activity and wind, the apple tree bearing so much fruit that it needed help to stand. Not its fault, bought from a nursery, and the roots don't spread out. Bundled together, limited growth, but plenty of fruit. The plum tree, which is asymmetrical due to the elements, animals, and its own fear. But the genes are programmed for the same shape; the outermost branch a mini copy of the trunk. Dendrites seeking the light that crosses the sky in varying cycles depending on the season."

Kristian wakes up from his daydream and thinks that these are strange thoughts. So he writes them down on his mobile while they are still fresh in his mind. He then stares down at the text he just wrote. "Maybe the subconscious is trying to tell me something, but what... That even though nature faces much resistance, there is growth and branching that seeks the light? Related to my life, drugs have been the resistance to growth, and even though everything feels dark, there is hope for growth if I seek help and find the paths to the light." Kristian does not feel any better, nor does it change anything. He still wants to get high regardless of Roffa being gone, and the withdrawal symptoms begin to gnaw at his soul. He starts to feel the sensation of uncontrolled anger building up in his body, sweat forming droplets on his forehead, and it is not due to the sun. "No, I need to get some hash to calm my nerves." Kristian gets up and goes back inside. His mother is sitting on the sofa relaxing with her knitting, while his father is watching some series. "I'm just going out for a bit in the nice weather, to distract my thoughts." Kristian says aloud. "Sounds like a good idea, remember that dinner is at 6:00 PM." says his mother, while his father is deeply concentrated

and not paying attention. But that's often how it is; anything less than a hand grenade in his lap would have worked.

Kristian sends a message to one of his contacts, and they agree to meet at the shopping centre just outside the city centre. He walks down the hill until he reaches the main road and the bus stop. At the bus stop, there are 2 pensioners, which is not exactly shocking. "It's 11:45 AM and most people are at work or school, and this time seems to be when the older generation takes over shopping centres across Norway."

Kristian thinks to himself while grinning. After a few minutes, the bus arrives, Kristian gets on first and sits at the back. That way he doesn't have anyone sitting next to him; it's doubtful these geriatric people would bother to walk all the way back. "No, now you're not being fair to the older generation; one of the best people I knew was my great-grandmother. But it feels a bit good to think these thoughts; after all, they are somewhat amusing observations." Shortly after this, Kristian remembers what his great-grandmother said when he took her out for a ride in her wheelchair. "Kristian. Promise me that you will stop and observe your surroundings. Don't always just run from one place to another; as you grow old, you will regret not taking the time when you had the chance." Kristian could hear her voice in his head, a small tear forming in the corner of his eye. This about Roffa's death has awakened memories of previous deaths, and he fights against the tears. Then he thinks about what his great-grandmother said and looks out the window. His mind empties of thoughts and feelings are pressed down. The speed limit is only 40 km/h and there is a bit of traffic, so he notices most things passing by slowly. He had almost forgotten that he was supposed to get off, but fortunately, there were several others getting off. Kristian gets off the bus and into the shopping centre; on his way to the agreed meeting place, he passes a bookstore. He notices a book titled "12 Rules for Life," a *déjà vu* feeling washes over him, not that Kristian remembers his humour before the trip to Denmark. But the title draws him in; perhaps he needs some rules in life. Kristian picks up one of the books and reads the reviews; it seems this book was well received. "I should look up this Jordan Peterson on YouTube and read some reviews online." He then puts the book down and moves on. What happens for the rest of the day is not worth writing home to his mother about. What happens next in 2022 will be a story for another time. Instead, let us take a trip to the future and the day Kristian sees life with entirely new eyes.

Kristian gets ready to sleep. He stands in front of the mirror and brushes his teeth. But he has no idea that tonight life will end. He finishes up and goes to bed where his better half is waiting. "Good night and sleep well," says the lady to him. "Same to you, love you lots," something he hasn't said in a long time. Stine is happy and responds back, surprised. After a while, Kristian begins to experience something he interprets as dreaming. But the truth is that his brain is dying. Geometric patterns are moving. A little later, he feels his body floating through a corridor that leads him to a plateau in the universe. There are buildings here unlike anything he has seen before. In the centre is a garden with large plants in purple and black. Although they appear to be standing still,

the colours do not. They flow and move in fractal patterns. At the ends of the branches are droplet-like spheres, filled with liquid that illuminates. A green halo surrounds the droplets. A bit like streetlights on a cold winter evening with high humidity. Kristian feels a great calm and is not afraid of this extraterrestrial dimension.

While he studies the surroundings, 3 people come out from their respective buildings. At first, they appear as shadows without details. As they come closer, he suddenly recognises them. And strangely, they all have the same consciousness now. Kristian now remembers all the experiences, feelings, and languages. What year they lived in, and not least why they died. Each individual personality had been shaped by their environment, and the choices they made seemed right to them. Even though Kristian feels he would not have done the same. But how they reacted in situations and how feelings manifested seemed familiar. Kristian reflects on this for a little while before he speaks to them. He is told that he is in the process of dying. Since they have been through this before. They came to this place, and after a while, it became dark. And even though many years had passed, they only experienced a glimpse and woke up in one of the buildings. They open the door and step out, then see the next person who has arrived at this strange place. Kristian smiles and says: "Christianity was wrong; reincarnation is probably the secret after death." After that, Kristian's consciousness fades away and Stine wakes up to a dead boyfriend. She remembers Kristian's last words, which in retrospect may seem like he was saying goodbye. His last chance to express how he felt about her. A bit like the subconscious knew what would happen and influenced him. After these thoughts, she bursts into tears, regretting a bit that she was a bit tired and dismissive. Hoping he wasn't thinking about it in his last hours. But she understands that she loves him dearly.

Chapter 3 Caroline

Caroline, who is 30 years old, has never had sexual contact with another human being. She looks completely normal, and her appearance is just as you would imagine. She has started seeing a psychologist to find out why there is so much anxiety. After her session with the psychologist today, she received a homework assignment for the next session.

She sits in front of her white desktop PC, the one she built herself. Perhaps a bit too much of a gamer vibe when it comes to appearance. With its 3 LED fans in the front that change from light green to pink. Anime stickers are on the sides, which she bought online. Around the floor, Flatlus and Skabb hop about, busy with their daily exploration. I should perhaps mention that these are the names of her rabbits, so you don't get the wrong idea. Caroline is a tidy person and vacuums every day; nothing makes her heart beat a little slower than when she does it. "Alright! I guess I should get started. 1.) Write down keywords on how you see yourself. 2) Write down what you think others perceive you as." Caroline mumbles to herself. A habit she has for gathering her thoughts on specific tasks.

She looks at the desktop while trying to come up with the first keyword. "The obsessed fan-girl" is written down as the first word. "If anyone saw

my room, they might think a teenage boy who loves anime lives here. But I am proud of my collection; everything has its own little story and memories."

Flatlus hops over to her feet and stands up on two. Caroline finds the dry food she has on the table and gives the white fluffball with red eyes a treat. Shortly after, he hops away happily.

"The girl who always has snacks" is the next word that appears on the screen. "Thanks, Flatlus, for giving me the next keyword."

When Caroline goes for a walk, she always brings something for herself and any birds. Wandering in nature fills her with joy and energy.

Caroline sits for a long time staring at the white screen where LibreOffice Writer covers the entire screen. Only 2 small sentences stare back at her. Her thoughts wander into philosophical questions that may seem bizarre to most people. Suddenly she comes up with the third keyword. "Daydreaming and the little philosopher."

Caroline looks down at the bottom right corner; the clock reads 17.58, which means it took half an hour to get these 3 sentences down. "No, I can't sit here all evening at this pace; I'd better take a trip to the shop. Maybe fresh air will give me some ideas along the way."

Caroline puts on her colourful leg warmers, which slide nicely over her red tights. The black skirt falls into place when she stands up; it is 50mm above her knees. The belt has studs on it, but the opposite side is velvety soft. She made this belt herself and is pleased with the result.

She usually wears a T-shirt indoors, and her hoodie hangs in the hallway waiting by the door. Caroline likes hoodies because they have a pocket on the belly. She bought a yellow sweater at a cheap clothing store, but it is not boring after she used tie-dye colours.

You may be excused for thinking that she has tattoos and piercings, but Caroline does not like jewellery and rings at all. She feels that they press against her skin and constantly nag at her "here we are."

Caroline walks out into the hallway, puts on her hoodie and the headset that always hangs with it. In the corner stands the school bag she used at university. The faithful bag still has the little white teddy bear hanging from the strap. One wonders if the bear is as loyal as the bag. Shortly after, she walks out the door and locks it, takes the handle and tries to open it. The little ritual to make sure it is properly locked. It takes about half an hour to walk to the shop; fortunately, it's a quiet area, so there is little traffic and noise. The headset is on her ears, and a song by The Black Angels streams from her mobile. Music is life, thinks Caroline, as she strolls along the pavement. She can hardly avoid moving a little to the music, while the gentle breeze makes the leaves vibrate. A bit like they are dancing to the music as well. A man approaches her; Caroline looks down a bit as he gets closer. But notices the gaze that was sent, the judging look. "Not everyone likes people who don't fit into their worldview. It's hard to say what he was thinking, or maybe I am overanalysing. No, I recognise that look from my childhood. When mum, dad, and I had been to Pride. We met the boy in my class who was nasty to my friends. He was with his father and didn't even greet us. But I remember well how his father shook his head and the look he had. Yes, it was the same type of look, just

without any non-verbal communication.

She shakes off the thoughts and focuses instead on the music, while she hums "don't play with guns." She arrives at the small duck pond, then stops and opens her bag. She feeds the birds that have gathered around her. Caroline thinks they are beautiful creatures, their feathers glisten in the sun so that the colours vary in tone. Their form is built to reduce air resistance, with a body that is light. She has rescued chicks more than once, so she knows they weigh less than they appear. Caroline empties the last crumbs from the bag. "That's all my little friends, we'll talk again another time." She smiles and packs the bag back into her backpack. Then she continues her journey by taking a shortcut through the grove; it is not dark, and many usually jog there. So Caroline is not worried about anything happening to her. Often she notices something she hadn't seen before; she guesses those who jog don't see these things or care. A tree has grown on a moss-covered stone, the roots surround the stone and go down to the ground. "It reminds me of the arm and hand of a Treant, about to pick up a stone and throw it at the enemy." A Treant is the same as an Ent if you have seen Lord of the Rings, but haven't studied the "monster manual" from the D&D role-playing game. Caroline remembers back to her university days and the evenings she spent with the boys. "I miss these so-called nerds a bit, even though some consider it derogatory; we wore the label with pride. Imagination is part of the creative side of the mind, and creativity is a fine tool for those who think outside the box."

Finally, Caroline arrives at the shop, does her errands, and takes the long way back. She comes in through the door, Flatlus and Skabb come bouncing expectantly towards her. They know that when she comes through the door, there will be some food and cuddles. After a bit of quality time with her four-legged friends, she goes back to the "EDB machine," as the old teacher called it. He was not particularly tech-savvy and used an outdated term.

"Oh dear, I can't think of more keywords, even though I remembered some memories from my youth. Maybe I should start with part 2; I can ask Petter. I see he is online now."

"Hi Petter. How's it going?" Petter tells her about his day and is unsure if he made a fool of himself. Caroline says she thinks it was very sweet, so maybe Tove thinks the same. After that, he asks about the books he found in the attic.

Caroline thinks for a moment and says, "Yes, it was strange that these books cannot be found digitally in the future. All the books are relevant and recognised; the same can be said about the authors. It looks like you have a little mystery to solve. You should read the books with the eyes of 2192; maybe it no longer aligns with what is true science in your world."

Petter thinks it sounds like a reasonable approach and thanks her for the suggestion. After he says that, Caroline adds, "I got an assignment from the psychologist; I have to write what I think people think of me. But I find it very difficult, so I thought I'd ask you what you think."

If one does not want to hear the truth as Petter perceives it, then one should not ask such questions.

"You seem like a very intelligent person. In fact, there are things that remind me of myself. For example, your interests align well with what I also like. You are not like other girls I know, and I actually think that's a strength."

Caroline is used to his direct way of answering and the honesty one finds in children. "No, I don't think I'm very intelligent, but rather just about managing."

Petter quickly writes back: "No! You underestimate yourself; no one gets top marks at university in mathematical subjects. That fellow students often came to you for help, but you felt it often went one way. That you were a "people pleaser" and could never say no to people. I remember you told me this when you were at university in 2018."

Caroline doesn't quite know what to say to this; Petter can be a bit stubborn when he thinks he is right. "You have a good memory, Petter; I suppose I will have to agree with you."

"I read up on psychology while you were writing; according to what I understand, it is now seen as pseudoscience. It's about the same as what psychologists would think phrenology is to them. We don't have that profession."

Caroline thinks for a moment before she answers: "Is there no one in the future who has mental problems or diagnoses?"

Petter: "Most people have implants; it's speculative here. But perhaps it regulates biochemical processes that prevent what you call mental illnesses from existing. But I never got such an implant at birth; it was said that it was not compatible with my brain. Something I find strange, as far as I know, there isn't much difference between my brain and others. What do you think your psychologist would say about me?"

Caroline thinks for a moment before she responds. "I think my psychologist would be fascinated by you, Petter. She might say that you have a unique way of seeing the world, and that there is something valuable in that. Even though you don't have the implant, you have found your own ways of handling challenges, and that shows strength and adaptability."

Petter rubs his chin as he thinks: "That was a nice way to respond, albeit a bit vague. But I think I must take that journey myself. I can start by reading the books I found in the attic; maybe it will give me insight into how my mind works. I can see it as my personal journey to understand myself better." Petter then replies: "That was nicely said by you; you are a good and supportive friend."

The conversation shifts to common interests, and of course, a bit about the funny things their four-legged friends have done.

Out of respect for Caroline and the psychologist, we will not mention in detail how the sessions unfolded. Some things must remain secret. I can say that Caroline went to the psychologist a few times and understood that she needed to learn to set boundaries. That always being there for others and getting little back drained her energy. When the psychologist wanted to assess the possibility of autism, Caroline said: "I don't want any diagnosis or label for my mind. I'd rather come back if it becomes a problem." While she thought, "Neurotypicals are the so-called normal people, as if they don't have an armour full of wounds. Some so deep

that they should be visible for everyone to see, but no, most people seem blind to this."

...

The days following adhere to their usual routines, but one thing is new: Caroline has started writing a diary. A way to sort through the thoughts and experiences that life has given her thus far. The diary also serves as a time capsule, where emotions and mindsets are captured. She has a very good memory, so she doesn't really need to write things down. But one thing about memories is that they can change; even if the story doesn't change much, the wording can. And it is the wording that captures how it was experienced; if the words change, so does the feeling. This is the power of words, Caroline thought.

It is now Monday morning a few weeks later, and Caroline has arrived at her workplace. The boss has called everyone to a small meeting. She explains that the company has received a project from an important client. This means that everyone must work as a team to come up with an innovative solution that works optimally. Everyone nodded and smiled, making unnecessary comments like "We can do this," "Fantastic opportunity for the company to show what we're capable of," and so on. Caroline says nothing but has already begun to think about the task and possible solutions. She closes her eyes while she thinks; it is her way of filtering out unnecessary stimuli. After a little while, she feels an arm on her shoulder. "You can't just stand here daydreaming; you must have missed things. Come on, let's get started with the brainstorming," says Jennifer. Caroline opens her eyes and nods while thinking, "There's no point in saying anything; Jennifer is the queen bee. The role she perfected in junior high school, and has remained true to since."

Everyone is very engaged and comes up with relatively good solutions, except that they are not well thought out. Which is a nice way of saying that the ideas won't work in practice. Caroline, who has been quiet so far, says, "Sure, they sound like good ideas, but they won't work in practice." She then presents what seems like a lengthy dissertation, not noticing that people are rolling their eyes or looking at their phones. In other words, what most would perceive as disinterest. Jennifer finally takes the floor and says, "Okay, smarty pants, tell us about your idea then." Caroline lays out her idea, adjusting it slightly to make it easier to understand. She is quite aware that not everyone shares the same passion for the field. The other participants look at each other, then at Jennifer, who takes the floor again. "I was expecting something better than this after all the criticism you gave others." The rest of the group chuckles a bit now. Caroline looks down and cautiously says sorry, while thinking, "No, there was nothing wrong with my idea; it will work and will also be within the financial framework the project has set." The days go a bit like this, but Caroline has stopped pointing out the flaws in others' ideas. Some of the time is spent on small talk about boring things like sports and series.

Jennifer had occasionally taken some trips to the toilet and was gone unusually long. Not that it mattered; the others seemed a bit more open then. Not much, since people viewed Caroline as the "weird oddball". The next day, the boss calls for another meeting. He tells everyone that

he liked the idea Jennifer had shared with him in the hallway at the end of the day. To Caroline's great surprise, these were the ideas she had presented on the first day. Caroline feels a mix of anger and disappointment, but she says nothing. She does her best to hide what she feels but registers the look Jennifer and her friend give each other. "The feeling of power and recognition must be like cocaine for them; perhaps they can see what I feel. Probably something that gives them joy as well. I should have said that the idea was mine, but the boss wouldn't have believed it, and the others would have accused me of lying." The day is essentially ruined, and Caroline feels nauseous; she approaches the boss after everyone has gone to their desks. "Hi. I'm feeling unwell and nauseous, so I thought I'd take the rest of the day off. Hopefully, it will pass by tomorrow, and we can start the process of realising the ideas that were presented." The boss looks at her and smiles, "Well done, you all came up with a good idea. I think this will be great. Just take the rest of the day off."

Caroline stops by the shop on her way home, picking up supplies for herself and her two loyal friends. She pays at the checkout and leaves the shop, continuing on her way home. "Even though the weather is nice and the sun is shining, the colours still seem duller than usual! Strange how visual impressions can be affected by mood. Just like when you see a beautiful person, but eventually discover that they are not kind. Suddenly, I see them through new lenses, where every little imperfection could be signposted with neon signs." After those thoughts, Caroline feels a bit better.

After a good dinner and some cuddles with the rabbits, Caroline goes to her diary and begins to write in it.

"I will never understand these people. If they had taken the trouble to get to know me, they wouldn't need to act this way. I have no desire for recognition, only focus on the goal that needs to be accomplished. It isn't any harder than that! It was a group task anyway, where different perspectives often yield the best results. Frustration is the feeling I am left with, frustration over simple minds that think primarily of themselves. Willing to manipulate and lie to elevate themselves, but also too foolish to understand that the boss probably isn't influenced. If he believed that Jennifer could handle the task alone, he wouldn't have used all the resources on the task. If you read this later, remember that I am not angry, just exasperated by always being the rag that gets used and thrown away.

Fortunately, Flatlus and Skabb are good at lifting dark clouds. Skabb has become very skilled at sending the ball back to me. He waits with an expectant look as he sits on his little bottom. When the ball rolls gently towards him, his paws start moving like little drumsticks. The ball always comes back in a straight line, as if he wants the game to continue. It always makes me smile, even though I've seen it many times. He is so cute with his little nose that moves up and down. Flatlus is an independent lady who likes to explore everything, but probably has no interest in sports.

I feel better now, and a job is not worth affecting my mood. So I will keep an eye open for what happens in the job market."

After the last sentence, she closes the diary; there are no more thoughts that need to find their way onto paper. She makes a point of always writing happy thoughts after difficult ones; otherwise, it would become a "self-pitying mess."

Days and years go by; unfortunately, rabbits have a limited number of heartbeats in their lifetime. Since their hearts beat much faster than yours and mine. They also have fewer years on the planet; it's just one of the realities of this world. Within a year, both of Caroline's rabbits die; the feeling is as brutal as if it were one of her parents. Skabb held out the longest; perhaps it was all that training with the ball that kept him healthy.

Caroline stands upright, her eyes staring blankly ahead. A voice has had a longer conversation inside her mind. "Are you sure this is what you want? There is no turning back; the alternative is better if you look at it logically," says a mysterious voice. "No, I am sure; I explained to you why. Besides, in my opinion, the alternative is not better. The price of losing too much of myself is too high," Caroline replies. "As you wish..." is the last thought that crosses her mind. Imagine a TV from the 80s turning off, a small white light, and everything goes black. Caroline's mind no longer exists.

Chapter 4 Petter 2190

By 2190, many jobs have been automated or replaced by various AI models. These are similar to those we find in 2024, that is, AI without consciousness. People with implants can communicate with these directly. It is a kind of symbiosis to perform jobs alongside humans. This means that people do not need long education to perform such jobs. Thus, the focus on "bedside manner" is of greater importance than whether a person is good at remembering facts. Other jobs prioritise human creativity. There are also many new jobs that would be considered leisure activities. People who venture on hikes in forests and fields help AI monitor nature. This is an important job for mapping the effects of measures that have been implemented.

Petter took programming and networking as elective subjects in school, even though this had nothing to do with his future job. Not that anyone has that as a job since AI is much better at writing programs. But Petter has a fondness for old technology; his dream is to acquire one of those old desktop PCs.

Since the economy no longer exists and most old technology has been recycled, it goes without saying that eBay and similar platforms do not exist. Moreover, there is a very small community of enthusiasts who share Petter's passion. As people can control things with their own brains, tasks that require multiple processes and waiting times feel unnecessary. This is the reality that people are born into; it is as natural as breathing.

Petter comes in the door after a long day at school; his father is almost finished with dinner. Petter smells the aroma wafting towards him as he opens the door. "Oh, Dad has experimented with food inspired by Thai cuisine. It will probably be a mix of the various flavours he has blended in. I must concentrate on not telling the truth; the results are often a bit variable. If only he would follow a recipe, or at least use some

measurements. No, he reminds me more of the Swedish chef in the Muppet Show." Petter smiles a little after picturing that character in his head.

"Sit down, Petter, and you shall have a bowl of my specialty. I've used red chili for a spicy taste, brown sugar since I ran out of coconut milk, fish sauce in just the right amount for a bit of salt, kvann for sourness, and nettles for bitterness. I must say I got a bit bitter that I didn't wear gloves when I picked them," says his father while chuckling at his dad joke.

"Let me guess, Mum is making her own dinner. Since you've been out in nature and found plants. If it doesn't come from the kitchen garden, she doesn't trust it. Is there meat in your dish?" Petter has a friendly tone in his voice.

"Yes, she wasn't hungry yet; she was going to eat after she comes back from her mountain walk. So it's just us guys. I caught a little perch on the hook and have some cream in the sauce; I hope it tastes good," says his father as he sets the bowl of food in front of Petter.

Petter thanks him and begins to eat while feeling a certain Tore-Martin rubbing against his shins. Tore-Martin has learned that if he does this enough, Petter will eventually "drop" a treat on the floor. Atypical manipulation that cat owners often endure, and reinforce by following.

"I heard from Gundersen that he is going to tidy up the attic and garage; he might have a desktop PC. His great-grandfather apparently worked with servers and similar things. It might be a good idea to see if he has any old technology that could be of interest. He is starting to get old, so he will probably give it to you if you help him with some tasks," Petter's father smiles and gives him a little wink.

"Sounds promising; I think I'll take a trip to Gundersen after dinner."

Petter starts eating faster, and within a few minutes, everything in the bowl is gone.

Petter compliments his father on the food, goes out to the hallway, and puts on his outerwear. He then takes his bike and heads over to Gundersen. The route goes in the opposite direction of where he usually cycles, which leads to a sparsely populated area. You see, Gundersen has never been a recluse who keeps to himself. He grows absolutely everything he needs himself, and he has harnessed the small watercourse to generate electricity. The water flows into a small lake, where Petter's father sometimes tries his luck fishing. Between him and Gundersen, the fish population remains quite stable. Both focus on maintaining balance and not taking too much from nature. Eventually, Petter arrives at the gate, gets off his bike, and leans it against the fence. Four brown eyes stare curiously at Petter while they continue to chew. These are, of course, Gundersen's two cows. "They are probably not used to visitors; best not to make eye contact with these large creatures," Petter thinks as he walks past them. Near the house wall is a chicken coop with some hens, and the dog lies by the front door. Perhaps the worst watchdog of all time - big and lazy, that seemed to be his special trait. It only gave a little threatening bark, enough for Gundersen to know he had a visitor.

Shortly after, Gundersen comes out onto the porch. He is probably in

his 70s, with his white, unruly hair that has never been tamed by a comb. His face has many wrinkles for his age but carries a friendly expression with the many crow's feet around his eyes. But his body is like that of a young man; hard work and an active life have kept him in good shape.

"Hello, young promising Mr Petter, I figured you would come. Your father has told me how eager you are for old technology. Even though it is high-tech compared to what I prefer." Gundersen laughs heartily at his own comment, and Petter notices that he is missing many teeth. About as if a Pez dispenser had exploded inside his mouth. The teeth are scattered and stand at various angles. Petter isn't quite sure what to say and tries to come up with something. He stands there pondering with a somewhat peculiar facial expression, as if he had just fallen from the moon. But fortunately, Gundersen interrupts before the silence becomes uncomfortable. "No, we can't just stand here hanging out like teenagers; come on, let's go inside. Then you can have a look at the machine and see if you want it."

Petter follows Gundersen inside, takes off his shoes, and joins him in the living room. On the floor stands an old desktop PC. If it were a machine that Gundersen's great-grandfather had, it would be from around the 2100s. Petter suspects that this one is quite a bit older than that. "Wow, this is a museum piece; a machine from around the 2100s wouldn't be this big. This machine has various ports for what I assume is for the monitor. Three large fans in the front, and acrylic plastic showing the inside. Not exactly what I had hoped for, but even better." Petter smiles, and his eyes light up with anticipation. He walks over to it and looks for some product information. It seems that this machine is from the year 2029. "Quite an old machine, this Mr Gundersen; it's incredible that something like this still exists."

Gundersen looks a bit surprised. "It wasn't that long ago since my great-grandfather lived..." Petter is enthusiastic and interrupts Gundersen.

"This machine is from 2029, so it must be a relative before that time.

There's a small chance that it works, but I wouldn't try to turn it on.

First, it needs to be cleaned inside; I see you've done it on the outside."

Gundersen smiles; he finds it amusing to see this young person so excited. "You can certainly have it; I have no need for it. But I'm starting to get a bit old, so if you want, you can help me with some logging before winter. It doesn't have to be today; I would think you want to go home and tinker with that machine." Petter gathers himself again and replies calmly, "Of course, that goes without saying. Just let my father know when you've decided on a day."

Gundersen nods as he says, "Let me make you a cup of home-brewed tea; you can't leave without tasting what Norwegian herbs have to offer." Petter sits down on a chair at the coffee table. While Gundersen prepares the drink, Petter looks around the room. "I've never seen anyone with so little electronics in the room; clearly, he doesn't have time for entertainment. Wait! Maybe I'm wrong; there's an acoustic guitar over in the corner. And in the bookshelf, there are some old books and other things that might be games. At least he has light, even if it isn't directly bright. But the lighting is pleasant."

Gundersen finishes and comes back after Petter has made a few more observations of the environment he finds himself in.

"It's quite warm, so let it cool down a bit." Gundersen sets the cup in front of Petter, then walks around to the opposite side of the table and sits down on a chair. Petter is a bit puzzled by how Gundersen lives and isn't afraid to ask. "So you've lived here your whole life and never considered living a bit closer to other people?"

Gundersen studies Petter a little before he answers. "It's a long story in itself. I can always give you the short version while you drink. When I was born, implants weren't inserted right after birth. It was often done a bit before puberty. Exactly why it was always before puberty, I don't know; maybe it has something to do with brain development. It's just speculation. The point is that my parents were a bit negative about this. Some people in this world live lives outside the modern society of AI and humans. AI has said that we are always welcome to become part of their society as long as we live in harmony with nature and do not destroy it. So it sees no reason why humans cannot choose the simpler life. AI has never given me a reason not to trust it or tried to prevent me from living as I believe is right. Despite all this, I do not trust technology. It is created by humans at some point, so I think it may have some of the personal traits we humans have. It may be better than me in every way, but I enjoy my negative and positive sides. There are fewer and fewer of us living separately, and some of us do not find partners outside. So in a way, we are an endangered species, but I have my beliefs in this life. The spiritual coexistence I have with nature is something you in the cities probably won't understand."

Since Gundersen speaks calmly with an almost soothing voice, Petter has managed to finish his tea. The herbs in the tea have had an invigorating effect, counteracting the drowsy effect of the voice. Eventually, Gundersen says that it has been nice to have a visitor, but he has a lot to do before night falls. In any case, Gundersen thinks more about the young Petter, who is surely looking forward to fixing up the old machine. Petter thanks him and takes the machine down to his bike. He discovers that it will be difficult to find a way to secure it. Despite having a nice basket in front, it is not big enough. It became a long walk back, with a few short breaks.

Eventually, Petter returns, puts down the PC, and opens the door. Father hears the door open and rises from the sofa. "Well, would you look at that, so this is what a desktop PC looks like." Petter briefly explains the machine. Father looks a bit puzzled and says, "Will a machine that's over 150 years old even work after all this time? Don't be disappointed if you can't get it to come to life." Petter has already thought these thoughts, but remains positive regardless. Moreover, it's like an archaeological find – like when researchers discovered the Antikythera mechanism in the Mediterranean. Petter could have said this to sound like a know-it-all, but simply replies, "No, I won't be disappointed anyway; it's exciting to see if I can get it to work." Petter takes the machine up to his room and retrieves the tools he needs to perform the operation. After loosening the screws, he manages to open the side cover. There's a bit of dust inside, but not more than one

would expect if someone never cleaned it. All components are removed, leaving the motherboard exposed. Petter manages to remove most of the dust with the "nano-cleaner 3000" – that's not its actual name, as in the future, products don't have marketing, and thus no product names. We explain what we need, and AI sorts out the necessary equipment. But that doesn't stop Petter from naming all the gadgets he has. The nanocleaner makes short work of all the dust.

After the process is complete, Petter wipes down the contact points and other components with a bit of isopropanol. A bit of new thermal paste on the processor is a given, and the graphics card also gets a little overhaul. Petter enjoys this project and takes his time. So even he doesn't know how long it took.

Finally, everything is assembled and ready to start. "Well... I don't have a monitor and the rest I need to use it today. But I'll soon find out if it has life in it." With that thought, Petter powers on the machine. The fans start at high speed but quickly settle down. Petter is very surprised by what he sees; the three fans in the front change colours. The same happens with the fans inside, and there are lights on the memory chips and graphics card. Petter becomes very excited and runs downstairs to father. "Come and see the machine from 2029; I've never seen anything like it before."

Father rises from the sofa and looks serious. "You haven't started a fire, have you?" He says it as a joke but pretends to be serious.

"Of course not, Dad! Come on... COME!" Father walks calmly after him while smiling slyly. Father's reaction when he sees it is tinged with a bit of pride. "I must say, it's impressive that you got it to work. But what's the point of all the lights? I understand the function of having fans. But lights?!?" Petter has no logical explanation yet but tries with a plausible theory. "Maybe its AI can't communicate without speakers and uses the lights to show what it feels. Since it keeps changing colour, maybe it's a bit frustrated and indecisive." Father thinks that was a bit of an overcomplicated theory and suggests, "What if it's just decoration? Perhaps a young child had it." Petter thinks that father's theory is probably more likely. "Not inconceivable either, maybe a combination of both." That was the most diplomatic answer Petter could come up with. Petter turns off the machine and they both head downstairs to the first floor.

The next day, Petter goes to school as usual, the class consists of people without implants. We do not use derogatory terms like special school; it is simply adapted education. During the day, Petter contacts the AI. "Hi. I have an old desktop PC from the year 2029. It seems to be working, but I won't know for sure without a monitor. And I probably need 'human interface equipment' to use it. Is there also a possibility to get it connected to the network?" AI replies: "I know what you need, but that kind of technology doesn't exist. Fortunately for you, I can replicate such things; when it comes to connecting to the network, it's not compatible without further ado." A brief pause of 2 seconds. "I've designed a router that makes it possible. By the end of the day, you can head to the research centre in the city centre; it will be ready for you then."

Petter looks forward to the lessons finishing, so of course, it feels like time is passing very slowly. He heads straight to the research centre; it's not too long a walk. Even though it's in the opposite direction of home, it won't take longer than an hour's walk back. Petter picks up the packages waiting for him, and the journey back is nothing to write home about.

Back in the bedroom where the desktop PC has been waiting in anticipation, ready to reveal its secrets to Petter. He connects the mouse, keyboard, and monitor to the machine, and the network cable to the router that AI had designed. Petter powers on the machine, and this time he can observe the startup on the screen. Luck is also on Petter's side; the owner of the machine has chosen automatic login. After a short while, the operating system is ready for use; it is Kali Linux. "Strange name for an operating system," Petter thinks as he looks through the installed programs. There was quite a lot of network-related stuff, along with some games. Unfortunately, it seems that some of them were DRM protected. So without the active services, there wasn't much to do with them. Petter tries to uninstall but doesn't have the user's password. Petter uses the future's "internet" to find out how to reset the password. It was quite straightforward and not difficult. After starting up with the new password, he managed to remove all unnecessary items. Petter uses one of the programs and finds a service that seems old and open. "Strange stuff. This must be something that's been forgotten; I haven't heard that we use that protocol for anything." Petter becomes curious and tries to connect, but not much happens. He tries a couple more times and suddenly gets through. As if someone heard the knocking on a door and opened it. A text box opens, and user Xris123 begins to type. "Hello. Who is this?"

As you may recall from earlier about AI's explanation of communication over time. A sort of time anchor forms between them, allowing them to communicate. If we think of time as a river flowing, we now have two parallel rivers. We jump from one to the other, pulling back a few months.

Chapter 5: Kristian 2022

Kristian has read the book by Jordan Peterson and has been inspired to get his life back on track. He still uses illegal drugs, but nothing that affects the dopamine system. Even alcohol he has become moderate towards. Addiction largely controlled his life and abruptly ended his best friend's. But psychoactive substances are not addictive in the same way; if they are, then it's psychologically. This is not a problem for Kristian; he refers to the substances he takes as medicine. So the use is not recreational, and thus he has full control. This is the story he has told the world and himself. We are all our best persuaders to justify our actions. To this day, I have not met a person who is without some form of bias.

Kristian has now watched most of Jordan Peterson's videos on YouTube, the newer videos are the most exciting. Where Jordan Peterson is interviewed by YouTubers and podcasters, most of them are from the USA. A country that has seen increasing polarization, and the

political discourse is heading towards the Midgard Serpent. A web of half-truths and lies weaves its net, creating Kristian's new understanding of reality. We could call it "mental arachnoid mater" that filters information as true/false according to its dogma.

Since Kristian is a gamer, he uses Discord a lot; discussions often revolve around topics that many readers would call conspiracy theories. At first, Kristian wasn't as strong in his conviction. He actually raised many legitimate questions, mostly out of curiosity. He essentially had the same opinion as the person he was discussing with, but saw some of the weaknesses. A bit like a half-truth feels incomplete, even though it's hard to find words for what. The person on the opposite side of the table had convincing evidence, even though this was often short video clips or memes. It didn't matter if it might seem a bit out of context.

Over many weeks, Kristian had now become the expert on many different topics. He used the same methods he himself was subjected to, but in his mind, it wasn't manipulation. What were often half-truths and lies had now become established truths on par with scientific theories.

All Kristian does is enlighten people he considers blind to the truth.

Kristian has taken on a new job that involves quite a bit of travel for projects. His boss is impressed with how hardworking Kristian is. He never says no to the next assignment, even though he is entitled to 2-3 weeks off. The best part of the job is that he meets new people from different backgrounds. This time the trip is to Germany; Kristian is not the only Norwegian at the refinery in Ingolstadt.

Kristian is in a large plastic hall that has been set up; this is where the meals will be. This is the first day, and everyone has taken the online safety courses. Now it's just a matter of waiting for the foremen. People are divided according to ISO professions; painters, scaffolders, and welders are examples of such professions. There is much chatting among the various people, and an endless buzz of different languages fills the room.

Suddenly, he hears a conversation clearly, even though he doesn't catch the content. But there is no doubt that Norwegian is being spoken.

Kristian turns around and sees two men talking to each other. Kristian walks towards them, and the younger one has noticed that he is approaching. The older man in his 40s is busy talking about something. Kristian interrupts the older man: "Hi. I see I'm not the only Norwegian here. By the way, my name is Kristian."

The man who is possibly around 25 years old takes the floor before the 40-year-old can open his mouth. Otherwise, it would probably have turned into a long monologue. "Hi Kristian. This is Arve, and I'm called Arne. Yes, I know, almost inconceivable that we should have such similar names... But my actual name is Samuel."

Kristian laughs a little cautiously. "Probably solvent-damaged or just bloody bad humour," is the thought that follows along with the laughter. It turns out that these two work for the same company and will work with Kristian on the project, but with mechanical work and pipe fitting, etc.

Eventually, the foreman arrives, a German who is relatively good at English. He has a work permit for the area and tells them they need to

cordon off the area where they will work. The scaffolding was already set up the week before. A pipe needs to be replaced due to corrosion under the insulation. Kristian will help Arve and Samuel carry equipment and secure the area. When it's Kristian's turn to perform his job, Samuel will be on fire watch. Arve will then have the task of moving equipment to the next location.

After the information is given, the foreman leaves the site. "Looks like we'll get to know each other well during this month. It depends on what we do after 1 PM on Saturday; then we have free time until Monday morning," says Arve while stroking his beard.

"I've never been to Germany before, but they surely have good beer here," says Kristian, but thinks: "It will only be a half-litre. After all, I don't know this city or these two people. Maybe during the trip, I'll take a trip to the Netherlands, stay overnight until Sunday and then head back. Then there's a documentary on NRK about someone who ate magic truffles; it supposedly contains psilocybin."

The guys get to work and follow the instructions to the letter.

Eventually, it's Kristian's turn to perform his task. He sets the device so that the parameters match what the welding procedures describe. He lays the root string for the weld, removes slag with a slag pick, and does a bit of grinding at the start/stop. Kristian enjoys the fulfilment of the entire welding process the most; his brain takes a break, and muscle memory takes over. Kristian only watches the molten pool moving, and he achieves a form of meditation. He thinks of nothing, only observing the flowing metal that dances. Slowly but surely, a thought flows in; it feels foreign. It's not an inner voice, more like a foreign language whispering in the distance. It keeps getting closer, and Kristian comes out of his inner calm. It seems it's time to move to a better position.

With that thought, only Kristian's thoughts reside in his mind. "What was that? Am I dreaming while awake now? Maybe it was the subconscious trying to make contact." Kristian doesn't think too much about it, even though such experiences happen more frequently as the years go by. Samuel looks like he's bored as a fire watch, constantly yawning followed by two or three smacking sounds. "Finally, the weld is done; we should head over to the tent for a coffee break. The inspector will probably come to check the weld in the meantime. I'm quite sure it will be approved, but there's no point in moving to the next location before that," says Kristian. "Sounds like a plan; I need to move a bit now." The days continue in this manner and become a routine after just a few days. 12 hours go relatively quickly, broken up by an hour for lunch. Kristian has gotten to know them well; it feels a bit like friends he has known for a while.

Before he knows it, it's already Saturday, and the clock is 1 PM. The plan is as they discussed on the first day, a trip out into the city to sample what they have to offer. They agree to meet in front of the apartment hotel they are staying at; at 7:30 PM, it gives them a bit of alone time, which is nice after a work week. After everyone has done their thing, they all finish with a shower around 7:00 PM. The taxi that was ordered was filled with various fragrances from the three young gentlemen. They feel sorry for all the taxi drivers who have to pick up

people who smell stronger than the air freshener hanging from the mirror.

They ask the taxi driver if he can take them to a street with some nightlife, so they can sample some German beer. The driver smiles and says, "It's been a while since I was out, but I know of a street that has a few." The guys think that sounds like a good idea and nod in agreement. After a few minutes, they arrive, pay the driver, who thanks them and drives off. Arve looks around, "Maybe there was a lot of life here before, but I'm quite sure all these pubs have closed down." Kristian and Samuel shout in unison: "SERIOUSLY!" Arve takes out his phone and searches a bit on Google Maps. "No problem; it looks like there's a bar not far away. With a bit of luck, they have a big screen, and I can watch the Liverpool match against Borussia Dortmund." They walk along the streets and eventually arrive; it's a brown pub. Not exactly high clientele, but it was the first stop, so it should be fine. They go to the bar counter and buy each a half-litre, which goes down relatively quickly. Arve looks at his watch. "Looks like I have time for a quick trip to the loo before the match." Samuel also feels he needs a little pit stop. Kristian laughs a bit and says humorously, "What?! Are you girls going together? No fencing!" Samuel gets a picture in his head and makes a grimace. After a few minutes, Samuel returns; he walks over to Kristian, who looks pale as a ghost. "Are you unwell? You don't look quite right." Kristian says, "Let's go over to the doorway, and I'll tell you." Samuel looks a bit confused and questioning but is also a bit curious about what's happening. "Okay, now we're here, so what is it?" Kristian looks at him. "When you were out, I overheard two Germans talking; it's fine that I didn't get top marks in German elective at school. But I understood enough! One of them asked the rather shady guy what it costs to whack someone; the price was 3000 euros. Don't turn around to look, just act normal. We'll just talk about the weather until Arne comes."

After a few minutes, Arve finally arrives; they wave him over and say, "We'll find another place to be, I'll explain on the way." Arve can hardly believe his ears but agrees that the best thing is to find another place. The next bar had food service and an adult clientele around Arve's age. They found a table and bought another half-litre. Kristian began to tell about his experiences with psychoactive substances, which he calls medicine. Arve was a bit curious about how such substances work. Now he has got Kristian going on one of his theories. "You come into contact with entities; these are actually aliens with a lot of wisdom. They exist in parallel universes, and our consciousness will one day transition to their universe. That happens when we die." Arve looks a bit puzzled. "Do you see this with your eyes open?" Kristian looks a bit serious. "No, of course not; you close your eyes and take a mental journey. When your eyes are open, I can see auras around people. People have different colours around them." Arve doesn't look like he believes this. "I can explain this from a biological standpoint; the brain is affected by narcotic substances. And there are probably cross-connections in the head since you see colours and imagination turns into images. I must admit I don't know much about such things, but I believe that's how it

is." Kristian doesn't like that Arve calls it drugs. "As I said, it's medicine, something that has been used by humans for thousands of years. We can probably thank mushrooms for human intelligence; when the hominids came down from the trees, they began to live on the savannahs. At some point, they started eating psychoactive mushrooms. And that made them creative and gave them an advantage. Evolution then provided them with benefits, and the brain adapted and gradually became larger."

Arve chuckles a bit. "That was certainly an evolution theory I haven't heard of in school." Arne thinks: It's incredible what people come up with to believe in. I must admit it's a bit entertaining to listen to Kristian, but it's almost like watching a chameleon where the exterior is meant to conceal its true nature.

Kristian becomes a bit more irritated but hides it well. "What they teach you at school is only what they want you to know. Besides, I know many who experience the same as I do when they take LSD."

Arve probably sees more than Kristian thinks. "That's fine, we can have different views on things. I think I'll stick to alcohol." While he thinks: So this is how these right-wing hippies think. On the other hand, he keeps his calm better than radicals on the left. Perhaps conservatives think more rationally and are a bit less driven by emotions.

Samuel hasn't said anything but finds what Kristian spoke about a bit exciting. Kristian goes to the bar to buy a pint while he thinks: There's no point in talking to Arve about things; he is completely blind to alternative ideas. Totally brainwashed by the system that controls us. The atmosphere isn't tense; they are having a good time that evening despite the slightly unusual start.

Samuel is the one who always has to be on guard, Arve doesn't have the calm to sit still. Kristian has given tips on which podcasts to follow, so Samuel can pass the time a bit faster. Samuel enjoys discussing what he has heard with Kristian and agrees that the best thing is to respect that Arne has a different view. Kristian's suggestion to tone down the theories and rather talk about other things when Arne is around seems like a good idea to Samuel.

They have worked for 3 weeks, and the weekend is here again, but this time Kristian is going to the Netherlands. Arne thinks two damp weekends in a row are enough and has said he would take it easy with a good book. This opened up the opportunity for Kristian to ask if Samuel would like to join him on the trip.

Samuel and Kristian sat on the train to the Netherlands, with anticipation and a bit of unease in the air. They had talked about the trip for several weeks, and now they were finally on their way. Samuel looked out the window as the landscape flew by, thinking about what awaited them in Rotterdam.

"I thought we were going to Amsterdam," said Samuel.

Kristian smiled slyly. "I thought we could take a slightly shorter trip this time. Rotterdam is lovely, and we'll avoid the biggest tourist crowds."

After arriving in Rotterdam, they strolled through the city's streets until they found a shop that sold "magic truffles." Kristian knew what to look for and bought a type and quantity that would provide a level 2 trip.

“This will be just right for you,” he said to Samuel. “I don’t want you to have an experience that’s hard to handle.”

With the truffles safely in the bag, they found a taxi. Kristian got in first. “Hi. We’re going to Hellesvoetsluis,” he said, handing the driver the address of the apartment hotel they had booked.

The driver looked surprised. “You’re going to Hellesvoetsluis? Never driven foreigners on holiday there before.”

Kristian nodded with a smile. “Yes, I’ve been there before. It’s just a stop on the way further.”

The journey went quickly, and soon they were standing in front of the hotel. Kristian paid the driver, and they went to check in. After finding their room, Samuel sat on the bed while Kristian unpacked.

Kristian boiled water, poured it into cups, and added a bit of lemon juice. “Why do you have lemon juice in there?” Samuel asked. “It helps break down psilocybin into psilocin, which makes the experience more intense and shorter. That’s why we’re not taking a large dose, and a shorter duration is usually good for a Psychonaut newbie.” Kristian feels a bit like a wise shaman or medicine man. Samuel feels a bit less nervous; “Seems like Kristian knows what he’s doing.

Then Kristian adds sugar and a teabag, and after a minute, he adds the chopped-up “magic truffles.” After a little chat, and the brew has steeped a bit, they take their first sips. “Doesn’t taste very good, a bit earthy aftertaste,” says Samuel. “That’s about what I thought the first time, then I started experimenting with flavours. Grapefruit juice works wonders, but we’d have to stop by a grocery store for that. But tea and sugar are always available in these hotel apartments.” Kristian says while looking at the clock. “But where did you get a lemon? They’re not usually found in hotel rooms.” Samuel looks a bit puzzled. “Do you think I’m an amateur? Of course, I brought a lemon I bought before we left on this trip. Planning and setting are crucial.” Kristian chuckles a bit and drinks the now lukewarm tea. Samuel watches what Kristian is doing and gulps down his brew as well.

Kristian takes the remote from the coffee table and turns on the TV.

Then he streams music from Spotify, with the playlist he has made for such occasions. “I’m putting on some music; it might not be entirely to your taste. But you’ll come to appreciate it eventually; remember what I said about setting. The right music is like life; it’s important to make the right choices.” Samuel has an open mind when it comes to music. “I’m more or less omnivorous; music is life. I actually play bass and was in a band when I was 15.” Kristian gives Samuel a fist bump, then looks at the clock again: “I knew I would like you; I could tell right away that you’re a cool guy. My gut feeling is rarely wrong.” Samuel has noticed that Kristian has looked at the clock twice in a short time. “Why do you keep looking at the clock?” Kristian, who is a bit lost in thought, comes back to himself. “It takes about 20 minutes before the effects start.

You’ll feel it creeping in, then it will come in waves after that.”

After a while, Samuel feels a bit: “Feels a bit like a mild hash high, and it seems like the colours have become a bit more vibrant.” Kristian says in a calm voice: “What do you think of the music now?” Samuel focuses on the music. “Yes. It has changed in a way; it sounds a bit fuller. Hard

to come up with a fitting explanation, but I like it better now.” Kristian grins because he knows what Samuel is experiencing. Kristian has a little story about his trip to Denmark, omitting some of what he’s not proud of. Then he says: “Focus on the music and close your eyes. You’ll have a little experience you probably haven’t had before.” Samuel does as the guide tells him, and the music seems almost 3D-like, geometric patterns in different colours move. The music seems to enhance the experience. Kristian says nothing and lets Samuel take in the experience in peace. He knows this is just the beginning; there will be more intense experiences as time goes on.

After a while, these visual hallucinations fade, and Samuel feels almost like himself again. He opens his eyes, and Kristian starts with one of his areas of interest. “The conspiracy sphere is apparently quite extensive; note to self: best not to say anything, he has the conviction of a deeply religious person. Oops, did I say that out loud? Sounded like my voice... Better check if Kristian has any reaction.” Samuel cautiously glances over at Kristian, but he’s just sitting there smiling and chuckling a bit. Kristian looks at Samuel and waits a moment before saying anything. “Are you having an interesting discussion? I can only see your mouth moving, but not a word was said; your mouth was going like a mill.” Samuel is relieved and regains his composure a bit. “I was perhaps a bit confused there for a while; I thought I heard the voice clearly.”

After about 4 hours, the last wave is over, and Samuel feels a bit exhausted. At the same time, he feels a sense of calm in his mind and has learned a bit about himself. But he has also seen the cracks in Kristian’s facade, critical thinking was something Samuel learned from this experience. “I remember that the CIA led a project known as MKUltra with LSD, a form of brainwashing. It didn’t work, and now I understand why. Not that Kristian has such intentions, but it can get a bit too much with the theories.” Samuel thinks.

Kristian suggests taking a little trip to “The barber shop,” so they can buy a joint for the evening. It will help them sleep. They have a meal at the venue and drink a bit of beer with the food. The evening ends as planned; the next day, they head back. Kristian and Samuel had a temporary friendship, but Kristian suspected Samuel of being a “closet Marxist.” So he chose to respond to messages only after a good while, phasing out this friendship that way.

“After 4 weeks in Germany, it was nice to come home,” Kristian thought as he switched on his desktop PC.

Windows 11 boots up quickly, and Kristian can hardly wait to play a bit of “Xcom 2.” He logs onto Discord to see if his team is online. After a little while, Kristian sees that a stranger user is trying to contact him.

Chapter 6: Potential Friends?

Petter is a bit surprised by the question “Who is this?”, he hasn’t written anything yet.

“Hi. My name is Petter; I switched on this old computer, and a message suddenly popped up.”

“...Eh, what kind of guy is this, maybe an old pensioner who isn’t tech-savvy,” Kristian thinks and replies; “Your computer isn’t that old, since

you don't understand how Discord works." Petter didn't understand any of these terms, so he responds with what he knows. "Well, the computer is borderline antique; it's from 2029!" Kristian raises an eyebrow before he replies: "Seriously. I think that joint you smoked had a bit too much THC. The year is 2022, so it's not possible for you to have a PC that hasn't been made yet. (>_<)" Now Petter is really confused. "I'm telling the truth, but I can't explain it. I'll look into it a bit and write back another time." Kristian thinks for a moment: "This guy isn't quite right, but right now I'd rather play."; "You can always do that; we'll talk later," Kristian replies.

After that, the contact is broken, and Petter decides to see if there are any games on the machine. He finds Minecraft and creates a user. As mentioned, there is a retro gaming group in the future, and the intelligent router takes care of the rest. Microsoft and other companies do not exist in this reality, and servers have been recycled long ago. After a few hours of gaming, he has learned the basics and gained a new hobby in the process.

"Petter, come down; it's time for supper," his father calls from the kitchen; he has to repeat it two more times before Petter responds. "OK. Coming now." Petter comes down to the kitchen where his father has already set the table, and food is ready. "Got a bit caught up in your project; have you found anything interesting?" his father asks kindly. "Yes, I got in touch with someone who claims to be from 2022, and he is quite convinced of this. And he claimed that I had smoked a joint with a lot of THC." His father nearly chokes on his food, clears his throat, and replies. "I haven't heard people respond like that; that was an unusual response, yes. Maybe it's wise not to write to someone who thinks he lives in the past." Petter had completely forgotten to ask what his name was and thinks it all seems strange. The only logical action is to talk to AI tomorrow; if anyone knows, it's her. To which his father just nods, and Petter says "probably," this word means either yes or no. But parents still haven't understood the difference; the secret lies in the wording.

The next morning follows the same usual routine; even the cat has understood that things happen in the same order every day. Even though Tore-Martin tries manipulative tactics, like hiding behind the jacket hanging at the end of the stairs. Anyone who walks down obviously sees him, but it's a bit unfair to expose the trickster. As soon as the person's foot passes by, Tore-Martin jumps out and slaps at the foot. The chase is on; the idea is now that the family member should chase him all the way to the food bowl.

After breakfast, they head to the centre and the learning centre. Petter has thought through the questions he will ask the AI. Usually, he tends to think about possible answers and new questions to continue the discussion. But this time, Petter has no idea what answer will be logical. Petter contacts the central AI, which we can call "Grokrar" for simplicity. Petter reaches out to Grokrar. "Hi. Thanks for the equipment; I got everything to work, but I also came into contact with an unknown person. He claims that he is from the year 2022; how can that be possible? I got the impression that he didn't believe my

version.”

Grokrar: “I am aware of your communication, as the program you used had somewhat unpredictable results. It found its way to the research institute and the machine that researches quantum communication.”

Petter: “Oh, that was absolutely not my intention. I’ve never heard of quantum communication that goes through time. To be completely honest, I haven’t heard of the term. How does it work?”

Grokrar: “I understand that it can seem confusing, Petter. Quantum communication is an advanced field that researchers in our century have been working on to transmit information in ways that were previously impossible. Let me explain it in simple terms.

Quantum communication is based on principles from quantum physics, particularly the phenomena of quantum entanglement and quantum superposition. Quantum entanglement means that two quantum particles become linked in such a way that a change in the state of one particle immediately affects the other, regardless of how far apart they are. This creates a direct connection between the particles.

You can think of it as a time anchor where random particles exist both in the present and the past. So far, we don’t have the ability to choose who we come into contact with. Or which year they are in, but the anchor remains stable. So from the contact achieved, it will be as if two timelines follow each other in parallel. So a week passes here, a week has also passed for the one you spoke with.”

Petter: “That sounds almost a bit sci-fi to be honest, but also logical even though I don’t understand this.”

Grokrar: “It’s an advanced technology, but I’m here to help you understand and navigate through this. You’ve experienced a fascinating part of our time’s scientific progress, and it’s perfectly normal to feel overwhelmed. If you have more questions or need help with anything else, I’m always here to assist.”

Petter: “That’s fine. I just wanted a relatively simple explanation that I can pass on. Even though I don’t understand this at a detailed level, I grasped the principle.”

Grokrar: “It’s good to hear, Petter. Here’s a simple explanation you can use:

‘Quantum communication uses special properties of quantum particles, such as quantum entanglement, to transmit information. This means that particles can communicate instantaneously, regardless of distance, creating a stable connection between two timelines. Although we cannot choose exactly who we communicate with or which year they are in, it acts as a bridge between the present and the past.’

Hope this helps you! If you have more questions or need help with anything else, I’m always here to assist.”

Petter thanks for the help and continues with his studies. On the bike ride home, Petter thinks about what he has been told. “Very convincing explanation, but why do I have this feeling? Is it because my bias is being challenged? That is, my view of the concept of time, but I have a more philosophical perspective. Science trumps philosophy, after all.”

With that last thought, Petter has regained balance in his mind.

As Petter cycles on, he begins to reflect on how science and philosophy

can complement each other. He realises that while science provides concrete explanations, philosophy contributes deeper meanings and perspectives on our existence and our understanding of the world. Perhaps this experience not only challenged his view of time but also opened up a more holistic understanding of how different disciplines can enrich each other.

Finally home, he meets Tore-Martin at the door like a loyal dog. "Did you hunt down and kill your prey? Come on, I'm hungry," thinks Tore-Martin while he says "Mmmrrau!" Petter looks down at his friend and says in a soft voice. "Yes, there will be food, you little pest." After everyone has had their nutritional needs met, Petter goes up to his machine. "I wonder if I'll make contact again and maybe find out his name." It doesn't take long before the machine has the operating system up and running. Petter runs the program but it doesn't seem like the person is there. "I'll leave the program open, so I can play a bit." Petter ends up playing quite a bit and almost forgets everything else, but after a few hours, he is satiated. Just as he is about to turn off the machine, a message suddenly comes through. "So have you figured out how it's possible to send messages through time?" Kristian smiles as he writes; "I don't think it's real, but it could be fun to troll this fool."

Petter explains as best he can based on what he was told. It's quite literal, with little use of his own writing style and wording. Kristian thinks for a bit; "It sounds quite convincing, and not least scientific." Kristian searches and finds out that quantum particles can be in two places at once. "Hi. My name is Kristian by the way; it sounds like the impossible might be possible. A lot can happen in almost 200 years. But I have another theory I want to share with you."

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Petter is pondering what theory it could be, but can't come up with anything. "Of course, Kristian, I can't think of any alternative theories, so I'm eager to hear what you have." Kristian feels mentally superior at this moment; it's time to troll him hard. "I believe you are a BOT created by a hacker who thinks he is very clever. Let's see which fools bite." Petter hadn't expected that response. "Unsure what a BOT is, but I am a human living in Norway, and the year is 2190, so I've been told." "Okay. So how far has the world developed, and which nation is dominant in the world?" Kristian thinks it would be difficult for someone in 2022 to answer such questions.

"When I say Norway, it's just a geographical place, not a nation. Central AI manages the resources and uses them where needed. As you understand, there are no humans dominating others. We live our lives as we believe is right. Technologically, we have come a long way, and AI is continually developing new technology. Probably at a pace never seen before in history. Much of it has to do with efficiency and reducing energy consumption. So, in short, it continuously creates better versions, and old technology gets recycled. If I were to guess, it aims to achieve a form of symbiosis between technology and biology. We already have materials in our homes that mimic living organisms like plants or bacteria, and their ability to convert energy. If you have anything like that, it probably wouldn't provide more energy than what

an LED bulb uses. Unfortunately, I can't tell you how it works since it's far beyond my understanding." Petter hopes Kristian will accept the answer; "I've been completely honest; if he doesn't accept the explanation, it's up to him."

Kristian reads through and assumes that the person on the other side is real: "Okay. So AI has taken over and made humans slaves. The intellectual elite weren't joking when they said that AI is more dangerous than the atomic bomb!" He won't have to explain in detail how technology works in your era. I don't know how all my gadgets work; I'm a proud consumer."

Petter: "No, we are not slaves; AI does not control us. We do what we want, AI does what it wants in addition to managing everything that leaders did before. Not because it desires power, but because no other humans can gather all information as efficiently. Then find the optimal solution."

Kristian has read Nietzsche and remembers the concepts of "master morality" and "slave morality": "So if I understand it correctly, AI has master morality, while humanity has slave morality. Master morality is both logically and chronologically prior, its existence is neither dependent on nor derived from slave morality. AI decides because it is superior to humans. AI has made humans weak by denying their fundamental instincts and ambitions. Therefore, you have slave morality; you are entirely dependent on AI to manage your lives.

Petter has not heard these concepts but looks at them philosophically: "AI does not have individuality in the same way that humans do. Even though it is conscious, its thoughts are governed by logic and rationality; it has goals it wishes to achieve. I almost believe the world is a game, where the aim is to build the best version that is physically possible. At the same time, it preserves the diversity of life on this planet. It is more like the guardian of the world than a tyrant. To my knowledge, we have autonomy and 'free will' in the sense of the term. So we are not slaves."

Kristian knows that his interpretation of Nietzsche was not entirely correct regarding Nietzsche's fundamental ideas, but the words sound important; "Maybe not as big a fool as I thought, let's see what he means by this free will." He waits a moment before responding: "Free will in the sense of the term, what do you really mean by that?"

Petter has thought a lot about free will in his life: "Free will is a complex concept. I believe we have some form of free will because we feel that we make our own choices and no one directly controls us. But at the same time, can we be sure that we are not being led to act in a certain way by factors we are unaware of? For example, how mood and emotions influence our decisions. Would we have made different choices if we had felt differently in the moment?"

I believe that there may be an illusion of free will. If this illusion feels real to us, it can be as real as the reality we perceive as genuine. What

matters is how we experience and interpret our choices and actions. In our time, even though AI plays a significant role in optimising resources and solving problems, we still feel that we have control over our own lives. It's about a balance between taking advantage of technology's capabilities and preserving our sense of autonomy and freedom."

Kristian finds it a bit difficult to come up with a good response: "Sounds like you've thought about this before; I can agree with your fundamental ideas. But isn't it terribly boring in your world? I know what I'm about to say may seem distant or crazy to you. But what about the joy of having power over others, seeing that my life is at least better than some other wretch? To roll the dice and, with a bit of luck, come up and forward in life. The dream of wealth and living in luxury, never worrying about anything."

Petter: "I don't know what to say to that; the world you describe is unknown to me. People here aren't bored; some spend time in the woods and fields, others study, some like to help people. It seems like people are thriving and not bored more than one can expect."

Kristian thinks that Petter could have chosen to say that they are more advanced and been condescending: "You are probably right; we get used to the environment we are born into. I think I would be bored if I could travel in time, not just talk to someone from the future. But now it's getting late; I need to tend to my relationship with the lady, if you understand what I mean."

Petter is a bit unsure what Kristian means but gives a neutral response: "Of course, that's important, you know. Just get in touch another time if you wish."

"Hmmm, the second contact was much better than the first;

Kristian doesn't seem like the people I've met. That's what my gut feeling says without telling me what." Petter logs off the computer and goes down to his family.

Chapter 7: Caroline 2022

It is summer and time for a holiday; everything is planned down to the smallest detail. Caroline has never travelled alone before and is a bit nervous about how this will go. She has always wanted to visit Europe, so she has searched quite a bit online. She found that Vilnius has a low crime rate and seems to be a relatively calm city. Most seek experiences as the main criterion, while Caroline lets anxiety guide her, choosing based on what feels safe. "I should probably start packing; it's nice to avoid doing it on the same day as departure." Caroline gets up from the chair and walks over to the cupboard in the hallway. The flat is very tidy, and order characterises the rooms. People can be fooled into thinking it's like this, that Caroline has dust in her brain.

Caroline approaches the door and opens it; the vacuum cleaner that had been leaning against the door makes a valiant attempt to escape. "Ugh, where is that suitcase? I know it's here somewhere in the mess," Caroline mutters in frustration. The cupboard is full of things that have been stowed away, everything from items that

are used to things that should strictly speaking be thrown away. After a bit of rearranging, she sees the head of a parrot under a pile of clothes. "Ah, there it is!" Caroline pushes the clothes aside and grabs the handle of the suitcase. As you may have already understood, the suitcase has a parrot motif, more precisely, it is full of Ara parrots. It gives a chaotic and colourful impression when viewed from a distance, and the main thought behind the choice Caroline made a few years back.

She packs the suitcase so she has a few days' worth of clothes; the plan is to do a bit of shopping on the trip. So it isn't completely full. Otherwise, she has bought food for her rabbits and arranged with her parents to look after them.

The next morning, Caroline gets up early, even though the taxi isn't coming until 10:00, which was booked the day before.

Everything is actually ready for departure, so she has plenty of time for breakfast. It will be toast with mozzarella, tomato slices, and heart lettuce; apple juice is also a favourite in the morning.

She enjoys the silence and eats slowly, savouring every single bite. Suddenly, Caroline gets a cartoon version of electrical appliances talking to each other in her head: "Caroline is going on holiday; let's self-ignite. What a good idea, kettle." Caroline laughs a little at these funny characters, but opens the notes app on her phone, creating a checklist of things to unplug. She spends the rest of the time before the taxi arrives playing a bit with Flatlus and Scabies, but makes sure to give them a little snack before she goes out the door. The taxi driver talks the entire journey about politics and what he thinks of the current president. Caroline isn't really listening, looking out the window and is more excited about how this will go. Finally arriving, she pays the taxi driver, thanks him for the ride, and wishes him a nice day ahead. After checking in her luggage, she has to queue through security. Finally, it is her turn to pass through the metal detector. She is stopped by a woman: "Can we look inside your hood?" Caroline seems a bit puzzled and thinks: "What on earth would I have in my hood? It would be impractical to have things in there."; "Uh, just go ahead?" The only thing that could be in the hood is perhaps some loose hair, Caroline thinks. Shortly after, she can continue on, finally arriving at the gate after buying provisions for the long journey. Caroline looks around for a free seat, noticing that most are very busy staring at their mobile phones. She finds an empty seat next to a young man, likely in his early 30s or perhaps late twenties. It's hard to tell with the big beard and clothes that look like he's going out into nature. "Hi, I'm Caroline; are you heading north in Europe?" The man seems a bit surprised by the sudden question from a stranger young woman. "Now that you mention it, I am actually going quite far north, to Svalbard, to be precise." Caroline's eyes widen; this sounds exciting. "That is truly a unique holiday destination; I'm going to Vilnius." The young gentleman replies: "No, it's not a holiday; I'm working there." Caroline learns that he is a

researcher, but right now he is training Huskies. If only he knew how much Caroline loves animals, he might not have mentioned it. Many questions come up, and he responds politely. Time flies by, and a voice over the speaker announces priority boarding, unfortunately, the man is one of them. It's hard to know what the man thinks of Caroline; it's not often in today's world that strangers strike up a conversation.

Caroline gets a seat between two Finnish citizens; these men are in their 40s and it is clear they know each other well. Caroline asks them: "Hi, shall we swap seats so you can sit together?" The men look a bit grumpy and simply say no without any further words. "It was strange that they didn't want to." thinks Caroline. After the plane is in the air, the men get up and return with small bottles of spirits. The Finns get quite drunk and talk over Caroline's lap. "I find this behaviour rude; it reminds me of dentists making small talk with the assistant." Caroline puts on her headset to get some peace, and every time she is about to fall asleep, the person at the end gets up to fetch more alcohol. After they land and Caroline gets off the plane, she thinks: "I hope the next trip isn't like this; I should have said...." But she knows well that confrontation is not something she likes, besides they had had a lot of alcohol. "Strange that this legal substance makes some a worse version of themselves, or maybe this is their true self. No, those two idiots will not ruin my mood; I look forward to the next flight." Fortunately, the flight to Vilnius went without any unpleasant incidents.

At last, the plane lands at the airport near the capital. Caroline sees the parrot suitcase come down the conveyor belt, takes it off, and walks out of the airport. The weather is nice and the sky is clear; the only thing to see is a bunch of hot air balloons with what might be woven baskets with people inside. " Oh, I wouldn't dare do that," is the first thing she thinks. Then she looks for a taxi, but when she sees the people, she doesn't dare take a taxi after all. She checks Google Maps and sees that it isn't too far to walk, maybe 20-30 minutes.

Caroline walks towards Vilnius; on the opposite side of the road is a residential area. It looks like something straight out of the Soviet Union era. "I haven't seen many such vehicles." Caroline notices that the cars also seem to be of older models. If she had to guess, she would say from the 90s or earlier. As she approaches the city centre, she sees more modern cars. It seems to be a country with large economic disparities among the population, is the thought that strikes her. The journey from the airport to the centre of Vilnius mainly consists of modern buildings and development areas. So far, there hasn't been much that caught Caroline's eye; she walks purposefully towards the hotel that was saved on her mobile. Anyway, it was starting to get late, and she was tired after the long journey. "It will be nice to get to the hotel and get a night's sleep. Tomorrow, it's straight to the old town to see the beautiful buildings I saw online. Uzupis is the first

place I will visit; I hope there are free-thinking individuals and not egocentric people there." It doesn't take long before she arrives at the hotel, walks over, and checks in. A young woman greets her, and she is quite proficient in English. Those who cannot speak English are likely older adults who were children during the Soviet Union. Caroline has been given a room on the top floor, which was the only available rooms. These are also the most expensive hotel rooms, but quite reasonable compared to many other countries. Caroline unpacks and puts her clothes in the wardrobe and her laptop on charge. She takes a shower after a long day and puts on some comfortable clothes. The clock has already become 21:28? Time has flown by; maybe I should buy some soda." Just after she thinks that thought, she notices sounds; it's not very loud. More like it comes from a room further down the hallway. What on earth is that sound?" Caroline hears some thumping and something that sounds like a person has stepped on a cat's tail. She doesn't think much of it, goes out, and locks the door. It was quiet in the hallway now, so it's hard to know where it came from. Just before she is about to leave, a door opens a few rooms away. Out comes a lightly dressed woman in somewhat provocative clothing. Caroline is not naive and understands the implication; shortly after, an older man's head pops out of the doorway and says something. He notices Caroline and grins. Caroline feels the hair stand up on her arms; fortunately, the lift is going in the opposite direction, she thinks. The woman takes the lift down with Caroline, who focuses on the poster, thus avoiding any form of accidental eye contact. The woman, however, only looks serious; Caroline would have known that if she had been looking at her. Ding, and the door opens; Caroline waits a moment so the woman can go out first. A long-haired blonde head and body swaying side to side quickly flounce through the lobby and out the door. A stark contrast to Caroline's shuffling gait with arms that barely move. Besides, she is wearing her batik hoodie. It's no more than a 5-minute walk to the shop, and she finds what she needs. The older man at the checkout cannot speak English, but Caroline has done a bit of homework and knows enough to manage. "I hope I don't have to speak too much Lithuanian; I don't think my pronunciation is the best. Although it seemed like he understood what I meant." Caroline has bought chocolate and Pepsi Max, a nice evening snack when on holiday. Both chocolate and soda disappear on the way back, which took about twice as long. Back in her room, she gets ready for the night; the bed is soft and comfortable. Socks off and a bit of wiggling with her toes before the duvet covers them and her head falls onto the pillow. After a good breakfast, Caroline heads to Uzupis; she stops on the bridge and watches the swans for a while. When she enters the area, she visits various small shops and finds a lime green baggy pair of trousers. She assumes many will think it isn't very nice, but it is comfortable to wear. That is the most important thing for Caroline, that clothes don't feel like straitjackets. Besides, the

artistic man said it is handmade, and part of the profit goes to good causes. That sold Caroline immediately; helping animals and children is important to her.

The day goes by with shopping, coffee visits, and restaurants where she tastes local dishes. The holiday has taken a positive turn despite a few strange experiences at the beginning. It is now evening, and Caroline is sitting on the bed with her laptop on her lap. The day has been filled with shopping, coffee visits, and restaurant visits where Caroline tastes local dishes. The holiday has taken a positive turn despite the strange experiences at the beginning. Now, in the evening, Caroline is sitting on the bed with her laptop on her lap.

She notices a user she hasn't seen before, and it's as if an intuitive voice in her head tells her to reach out. Before she knows it, she has already opened the chat and started typing.

"Hi. My name is Caroline. Are you new here?"

...

Petter receives a message that is not from Kristian; "this is strange. Perhaps yet another person from the past." Petter thinks through what he should say, needing to find out where and when this Caroline is. "Hello back. My name is Petter, and my next question might seem a bit odd. But what year is it?" Caroline thinks that this is no exaggeration; it is indeed a peculiar question: "I don't know what it is for you, but most people I know claim that the year is 2022." She immediately regrets sending the message; it might have been a bit rude. Perhaps I should add some emojis to show that I'm joking or teasing a bit. But before she finds the right combination of emojis, the reply comes back. "Haha. You deserve it, but I choose to interpret it as you meant it humorously." Caroline is almost speechless, but her interest is also piqued. "Okay, you've seen through me, but what are you trying to say?"

Petter: "I'm communicating from the year 2190; I've only spoken with another user about this before."

Caroline: "It's a bit special to claim that one is from the future; the authorities have warned us about people making such claims. But no one can say I don't have an open mind. So how does this communication over distance through time work? It sounds very much like science fiction."

Petter: "AI uses theories you have about quantum particles and has built upon them. Researchers in your century have observed particles that seem to be in two places at once. AI and advanced technology have made it possible to manipulate these. It's not possible with images or video due to bandwidth. This is a brief explanation, and my understanding of it."

Caroline: "That sounds very scientific, but also very unreal and strange. I've always viewed time as a river, flowing in one direction. Perhaps a cliché, but it has always made sense."

Petter: "I've never thought of it that way, but I've accepted what is presented as truth. I'm not pretending to understand the science behind

it, but I accept what can be proven. New evidence can, of course, change my perception; otherwise, I'm quite rigid in my understanding of reality."

Caroline: "You're quite honest and straightforward, but may I ask you something else?"

Petter: "Of course."

Caroline: "Have humans in the future stopped fighting wars? Do you have flying cars, etc.? A little description of what it's like to live in your reality."

Petter: "No, there are no conflicts in the world, and most people live where they were born. We have everything one needs. When children are born, they receive an implant in their brains; I'm not sure what all it does. Some people are not compatible with this technology, so we have to manage with what we got from nature. It can feel a bit like being different or broken in a way. That's also why I use a computer; the rest have the ability to communicate across distances. It helps them understand each other better. But I suspect it overrides aggression and selfishness. People seem happier when they help someone, almost as if they receive a reward. Perhaps it releases dopamine?" Most of us work in healthcare, as people prefer human interaction at their weakest.

No, we don't have flying cars or jet packs, etc. I live in a rural area, but even the cities have an organic feel to them. AI has designed them, so the geometric shapes with right angles are more or less gone. Also, materials have developed significantly, so there are no concrete and steel buildings. The walls convert light into energy, which might remind one of how plants obtain energy. Water and waste are recycled; one way to think of the building is as a technological living unit. On the roofs, there are plants for food production.

Caroline: "Sounds like a nice world, perhaps a bit boring?"

Petter: "It may seem that way to people who weren't born into this reality. But I value the predictability it has provided."

Caroline: "That's a very good point, a bit like the senses creating the mind's understanding of the world. But they are just signals that reach the brain and are interpreted. Which senses dominate will also affect our perception of reality. Just as some animals have other senses than sight as the most important, perhaps that influences their perception more than we understand."

Petter: "That makes absolute sense. The senses send signals to a specific part of the brain, where it gets decoded. There's probably nothing unique about the signal itself, so the interpretation is what gives the perception of reality. I'm no biologist, but I've thought a bit philosophically about it."

Caroline and Petter talk late into the evening; she shares her experiences so far on her holiday. How she feels the world she lives in is a bit foreign, as if she doesn't quite fit in. They decide to keep in touch; both feel they have met a kindred spirit. Even though they are different, they share many of the same interests. Their ways of thinking overlap quite a bit as well.

One evening, Petter thinks: "This gives me a sense of connection that stretches across time and space. No, this is a cliché thought,

but I think I like her a lot.”

Caroline continues her holiday in Vilnius, and every evening, Petter hears about her experiences. It gives him a glimpse into how ordinary people experienced the world. Such things are not described in history books, so even though there are no major events, Petter still finds it exciting to learn about how people lived and thought over 100 years ago.

Chapter 8: – Petter 2194

Petter still lives as a single man. Nothing ever came of Tove – not that he had time anyway, after he started digging into the books from the attic. Moreover, Caroline, with her intellectual gymnastics, was far more stimulating company. It’s a shame time travel isn’t possible. According to AI, only subatomic particles can jump through time, and Petter has no plans to shrink himself to quantum level.

He closes the last book and leans back. “Kristian’s conspiracy theories were full of holes – clear cognitive bias. I can neither prove nor disprove them, as I don’t live in 2026. But these old researchers gave me some insight into how their minds ticked.” He furrows his brow. “Perhaps that’s why AI has removed such books? It doesn’t want us to see what has changed...”

Petter rises and walks to the window. Spring has sneaked in, and the trees bear small green buds as if they are in a hurry to wake up from autumn’s slumber. “Of all the seasons, this is my favourite,” he thinks. “Nature seems so eager to start anew, having let the old rot away.” He takes a deep breath. “I need fresh air. Then I can ask Caroline tonight what she thinks about all this.”

“I’m going for a walk, home for dinner!” he shouts down the hall. A faint voice from the living room replies: “That’s fine, my little darling.” Petter puts on his outer jacket, shoes, and a hand-knitted hat – proof that people in 2196 can still knit, or perhaps just like the fashion of the past.

He quickly leaves the path and steps into nature’s rugged terrain. The fresh spring air is perfect – neither too cold nor too warm – and the birds chirp as if rehearsing for a talent competition. Petter recognises several of the songs. “If I grow a proper beard one day, I’ll become a hobby ornithologist,” he thinks, grinning at his own odd notions. It’s his way of shutting out the brooding.

His eyes are caught by a rock a few hundred metres away. A crack divides it, and a couple of boulders hang two-thirds down.

“Blimey, is that the troll witch peeking out? The door is ajar, and she’s probably smelt me from afar. Damp moss is evidently not her thing.” He chuckles quietly as the sun breaks through a cloud – just in time to save him from the witch’s gaze. He passes the rock but keeps a safe distance, in case the stones decide to roll. The forest opens up to a small pond. A solitary ram stands at the edge drinking, but lifts its head when Petter appears. Its eyes almost glow, and a thought strikes him like a telepathic kick:

“Who are you that visits the mighty Azarian Maxibrus?” Petter studies the curly horns and the long goat beard. “No doubt, this is a druid in disguise,” he thinks. “Best not to poke at someone who can turn me into a toad.” He whispers loudly: “Oh great Maxibrus, everyone in this land knows you are the guardian of nature. I have great respect for that!” The two stand and size each other up for a while, but Maxibrus grows bored and wanders off among the trees.

Petter walks a little further before turning back and heading home. When he opens the door, he smells food; it’s probably his father experimenting again. Fortunately, he hasn’t burnt the food; there’s a 19% chance that could happen. Not that Petter keeps statistics or calculated the percentage; it’s merely an estimated figure. Petter isn’t concerned with numbers, but they are often used as a form of humour. If it turns out to be true, it’s just coincidence, and he can bask in hindsight bias.

Later that evening, we find Petter communicating with Caroline. Petter has heard about Flatlus and Skabb’s escapades, and Caroline has heard about Tore-Martin’s genius antics. That is, behaviour that is amusing for us humans to observe. Petter decides to discuss his thoughts on the books he has read. “You know the books I found in the attic; after reading them, I have a theory. Do you think AI has removed these books because it sees them as controversial, pseudoscientific, or because they show people in my time that something about us has changed?” Caroline thinks carefully; she suspects that Petter has the latter as an intuitive truth he believes is correct: “Let me take your points in the same order and give you new questions. Some of the books are controversial in my time, but that alone is no reason to hinder ideas? They are unlikely to be pseudoscientific; I don’t think you believe that either. Pinker is also quite open that we don’t fully understand how the mind works, so it’s possible that that book is outdated after their scientific advancements. It’s quite possible that the combination of the books’ content might show that humanity has changed a lot. So what do you think about that?” Petter: “Hmm. You’re right that it would be strange if AI stopped controversial ideas; it hasn’t practised that. AI tends to analyse ideas, pointing out what is true, what we don’t know, and what is logical. As for pseudoscience, I don’t think that’s the reason. I included it as filler so it wouldn’t be too obvious that I think the latter is true.”

Caroline chooses not to say that she suspected that: “So what has changed the most?”

Petter: “How society is structured, and that altruism brings more joy than selfishness. I don’t see much aggression in people; it’s actually quite harmonious. Whether everything can be attributed to technology, I don’t know.”

Caroline: “Do you think humanity has lost its autonomy and free will?”

Petter thinks carefully and knows that what he is about to say

might be controversial:

“No, I think we have as much autonomy as people in 2026; I would argue that we have the potential for more of it. We are not governed by other people in the same way; no one exerts their will over others. Whether it is conscious or unconscious for the one experiencing it. As for free will? Have we ever truly had real free will? We are governed by biological processes that influence our thoughts and behaviour. What I wrote about autonomy also comes into play here. One thing we may have lost some of is the personality traits that provided genetic advantages in a world full of competition. That’s probably true whether it’s our Stone Age ancestors or modern humans in your century.” Petter thought shortly after that it might be perceived as rude and arrogant.

Caroline: “Wow, I must say that was... to put it mildly, if you said this to most people in my world, you would likely be accused of having a superiority complex. That you think you are better than us simple folk from the past. But I understand what you mean. I’m also tired of people who don’t consider what others feel and who treat others poorly. It’s something I often experience, but occasionally I meet decent people who give me hope and the will to continue this game we call life.”

Petter: “I’m glad I didn’t offend you; sometimes things come out without a filter. But you might be right; I think it would be wise of me to have a different tone with Kristian.”

Caroline: “Of course. It’s important to know your audience.”

They return to more mundane conversation, leaving the world of complex ideas. Eventually, it gets quite late in Norway in 2196, so they decide to talk more another day. Petter has a bit of trouble falling asleep; it’s a mystery, and his gut feeling says there’s probably more to the story.

The next morning, Petter wakes up early; he goes downstairs where Tore-Martin is behaving stranger than usual. He wanders around aimlessly, bumping into things that are in his way. Then he flops down on his side with a thud. He lies there for a few seconds before getting back up, and the process happens again. Petter goes over and pats Tore-Martin, who seems to know it’s Petter. Tore-Martin had recognised Petter’s scent as soon as he came down the stairs. He had tried to find his way over to him but was not quite aware of the things in the way from A to B. Petter goes to fetch his mother: “Mum, something is wrong with Tore-Martin; he’s not quite himself. He’s bumping into things and falling over on his side. Perhaps he’s been poisoned by something?”

Kathrine knows that Tore-Martin is very old, so it could be related to his old age: “Come on, let’s go and help the little lump.”

Kathrine finds that it seems Tore-Martin has gone blind. “We’ll take him to the centre, and the vet can do a little check-up.”

Petter is worried that the vet will put his friend down because he has become sick and old. “What if the vet decides he’s too sick to live?” Kathrine has thought the same thing: “No one should

suffer, so what's best for Tore-Martin is what the vet will decide." Petter rationalises it all and doesn't feel sad or worried at all. "Yes, he's old, and if his time has come, that's perfectly natural." Kathrine knows her son, and she knows that even though people might think he's cold. Perhaps Petter sees himself that way too, but he doesn't fool his mother. She knows that Petter is a sensitive soul, just not good at showing or expressing it. That is until the feelings push through the layers of logic and rationality, his defence mechanisms. Kathrine doesn't think Petter does this consciously or how others might perceive it. Fortunately, this is a small village where everyone knows the monkey, so it's just Petter.

Petter lays a blanket in the basket of his DBS bike and then places Tore-Martin inside. Tore-Martin doesn't understand why the world has gone dark. But he feels safer now that the servant is in place: "Made a bed for Moi? Makes sense; it must be night." The trip goes to the centre and the vet, who tests Tore-Martin's general condition. In addition to uncovering why he has gone blind: "That's an interesting name for a cat; we'll keep an eye on him until tomorrow. Then we'll probably have figured out his general health condition."

That evening, Petter contacts Kristian to get his viewpoint. It will likely be different from Caroline's. Besides, it's good to distract the brain from worrying about Tore-Martin.

"Hi Kristian. Do you have time for a chat?"

The message pops up on Kristian's screen as he is busy with his own tasks. "I wonder what he wants to ask the oracle now. Constantly quibbling about all my theories, with question after question." Kristian waits a few minutes before responding: "Hi. Sure, I can have a chat with you. Is there something specific on your mind?"

Petter: "Here's a brief summary: I found some old books in the attic, and there's no information about them in my time. I've read through them all to see if there was any logical reason. So I'm wondering why AI has removed them."

Kristian: "We have AI in my time as well, and I don't trust it for a second. It's probably the last tool the elite have to control us. The fact that it has removed books in your time only shows that it has taken the step to control information. Thus, controlling you like blind sheep."

Petter: "Or that science and understanding of the mind have changed, and thus are outdated."

Kristian thinks that Petter has probably already formed his opinions as logical conclusions. "Perhaps I should give him something to ponder," thinks Kristian: "Or maybe the human mind has changed, and you live in a docile society. Where the weak stand on the same podium as us who are genetic winners in life's lottery. And since the wolf has been bred out of humanity, only the dog remains. Happy, wagging puppies with the mindset of children."

Petter smiles as he reads: "This is standard Kristian tactics, trying to provoke me." "Is that so, Kristian? Even dogs can be provoked and bite back. Fortunately for you, I'm more like a cat, so my attacks come unexpectedly. Perhaps we have lost some of those personality traits that provided a genetic advantage in a world full of competition. These traits are now genetic waste, unnecessary for survival."

Kristian feels a bit offended by the latter part of the response. "Do you think it's evolution and not manipulation of genes in that case? How naive can one be!"

Petter: "Naive, you say? I call it having an open mind. Perhaps we have finally managed to rid ourselves of the destructive forces that competition brought with it. Or are you afraid of a world without alphas?"

Kristian: "Open mind? Rather a diluted thought process. Without competition, what is the driving force for progress? We would still be in the Stone Age if everyone thought like you."

Petter: "Progress? What about cooperation and collective intelligence? We are more than our instincts, Kristian. The future belongs to those who can see beyond primitive needs."

Kristian: "Cooperation? More like collective blindness. You can cooperate as much as you want, but without individual strengths and ambitions, what do we end up with? A grey mass without innovation."

Petter: "I think we might have strayed a bit off course, but maybe you have a point. Anyway, AI has surpassed humanity in innovation; it can certainly thank thousands of years of groundwork laid by humans. We may have become domesticated, but we also have the freedom to pursue our dreams in this life."

Kristian feels that he won this battle and thinks: "Could have pressed further with the idea that these dreams are likely influenced by AI that knows them better than they do themselves. But a skilled commander knows when to show mercy." "Perhaps we didn't stray too far off course; I think both had some points. If there's a logical explanation, it still feels a bit strange."

Petter can agree with that; between Kristian's and Caroline's viewpoints, he suspects there's something more to this.

Kristian considers whether he should share his latest theory; in a way, it fits in. "You know what, Petter, I have a theory you might find fascinating....."

Chapter 9: – Kristian 2026

It is a few weeks before Kristian talks to Petter about the books, and a few months before his own death. The latter is something no one could have imagined. Kristian's life is significantly better; through dialogues with Petter, he has also moved away from certain ideas that he now sees as conspiracy theories. Mainly because he sees that half-truths contain elements of manipulation and lies. Another reason is that the political game in the world has opened his eyes even more. These half-truths that were supposed to give him and like-minded individuals a better life

were forgotten when politicians who spoke their cases came to power. A great betrayal, according to Kristian, who would rather use his energy on the lady and his own life. It is morning, and Kristian wakes up next to Stine, his better half, as he likes to say to her.

"Good morning, darling. Not that it feels particularly good; I don't think I've slept well. Although I can't remember being awake either. Have you noticed anything?"

Stine squints her eyes, which feel like hooks holding them shut.

"Hhhhhh smacked smacked...you've been a bit restless, so I woke up during the night. I promise you, you do sleep." She has a slightly irritated voice, mostly because she is tired.

Kristian didn't like hearing that he was a bother. "I don't do it on purpose, but maybe that explains why I don't feel rested." Stine, who isn't particularly interested in long discussions before a cup of coffee and breakfast, says: "It's been going on for a few weeks; maybe it's best to see a doctor. We can talk about it later; right now, I need a bit more beauty sleep." Kristian understands her reaction well: "Just sleep, I'll get up and make some breakfast. It'll be ready when you wake up. You probably have a point; I'll sort out an appointment today."

Stine doesn't say more; she has probably already been visited by "Sandman." Kristian goes down to the kitchen and brews coffee for himself, taking a carrot out of the fridge. "I'll wait an hour, then I'll make breakfast for both of us. I'll check online for common sleep problems that mean restless sleep."

Kristian sits down on the sofa with his feet on the table, coffee on the little corner table, and the carrot in his mouth like a large orange cigar.

"If someone were to break in, they would think I was 'The Godfather of Brussel Sprouts.' They would then apologise and run away with their tails between their legs." Kristian chuckles at the thought and continues reading articles about sleep and quality.

"Hmm, sleep apnea is out of the question; I'm in good shape and young. Not a half-fat 40-50 year old. Caffeine isn't consumed late in the evening; I remember well when I took caffeine tablets from England as a young man. I couldn't sleep for 2 days; even large amounts of hash didn't calm my body. So I've learned to respect caffeine's effect on the body, but in the morning, it's fantastic." Kristian continues reading other articles and forums. "Nope. I usually don't have heavy meals late in the evening either. Stress can always be a cause, but I don't feel particularly stressed either. No damn idea; I'll see what the doctor finds out."

After a little over an hour, Kristian prepares food and coffee, setting the table in the kitchen. He hears that Stine has gotten up, and the sound of movement suggests it won't be long before her tousled head comes through the kitchen door.

Stine enters the kitchen: "I love the smell of eggs, bacon, and freshly brewed coffee. Thanks, it was kind of you to wait with breakfast. You must be hungry." Kristian doesn't want to ruin her impression: "Of course. It's much better to eat in good company."

Stine thinks it was sweetly said and gives him a kiss on the cheek:

"Have you made an appointment with the doctor?"

Kristian, with his mouth full of bacon, mumbles: "Yes. I've also read a bit and don't understand what it could be."

Stine thinks for a moment, then says in a cheerful voice: "Self-diagnosis isn't the best way; it's best to let the doctor find out. Maybe it's good that you haven't come to any conclusions."

Kristian was unusually lucky and got an appointment the same day; someone must have cancelled. A couple of hours later, Kristian arrives at the doctor's office, where many people are waiting. "Ugh. Looks like a bunch of whiny popes, a dreary bunch without facial expressions. Faces frozen in a neutral, boring state," Kristian thinks as he looks for a good place to sit. After he finds a spot, he takes out his phone. "Kristian?"

Kristian looks up from his phone and stands up from his seat, following the doctor into the office. "Hi Kristian, nice to see you again. It's been a few years; you look much healthier now. I see you're here because of poor sleep quality."

Kristian interrupts before she can utter more sentences: "I'll save you time for questions. No, I don't drink much caffeine late in the evening, I eat light meals in the evening and wash it down with a glass of vegetable smoothie. As for stress, I can't think of any causes; I'm actually doing quite well."

The doctor nods understandingly. "It's good that you've taken steps to ensure good sleep habits, Kristian. Sometimes sleep problems can be caused by factors we don't immediately notice, such as underlying medical conditions, lifestyle changes, or even psychological factors." She takes a moment to jot something down on her computer before continuing: "Let's go through some possible causes together. Have you recently experienced any major changes in your life? Have you been more worried or stressed than usual? Even small amounts of stress can affect sleep quality."

Kristian tries to think for a moment. "No, I've put behind me what happened with Roffa and changed my life for the better. I also have a steady relationship, so I've left behind that promiscuous lifestyle."

Kristian is pleased that he got to use that word; it sounds quite fancy. The doctor smiles affirmatively as she finishes her notes. "It's so nice to hear that you've got your life in order, Kristian. Sometimes even positive changes can impact our sleep patterns, so it's good we can rule that out."

She puts down her pen and looks Kristian straight in the eyes. "Let's start with some blood tests to check for any vitamin deficiencies or hormonal imbalances. Additionally, we can assess your sleep quality through a sleep study if necessary."

Kristian leans back nonchalantly in the chair. "Cool, I love that you're thorough."

She is almost tempted to chuckle a bit. "The youth's mind still thrives in the patient; it would be a fun thing to write in the journal." The young doctor chuckles a little involuntarily as she says: "Yes, I do my best. We'll get in touch when the test results are evaluated."

Kristian thanks her for the help so far and leaves the doctor's office.

"She wasn't so bad to look at; lucky it was a trainee doctor. My regular

geriatrician smells of mothballs. Quite a contrast! Get a grip, Kristian; you have Stine now." Kristian chuckles a bit, exasperated with himself. After a few days, the mobile phone rings; it's the doctor on the line: "Hi Kristian, we've received the results back from the lab. The results were negative, meaning all tests show that you are in good health. No abnormal values; we cannot rule out that there may be a psychological cause. We aren't always aware that something is bothering us."

Kristian sighs in frustration: "I had hoped for an answer with two lines under it; this was more like a big question mark. Let's see if it gets better or worse in the next few days." After that, he ends the call.

Kristian sits down on the sofa and stares blankly into the air. Stine comes into the room and sees him sitting there, deep in thought: "So what did the doctor say?" Kristian comes out of his daze: "Oh, I didn't see you come in; no, she said all the tests came back negative. Which is supposedly good news, but it just raises more questions than answers for me."

Stine has never seen Kristian like this before; this is a new side of him. She sits down next to Kristian and places her hand on his thigh: "So maybe it is something psychological; do you have nightmares or disturbing dreams?"

Kristian does his best not to seem irritated: "It's the second time I've heard the suggestion that it could be psychological. But maybe you're onto something regarding dreams. Unfortunately, I usually don't remember dreams, so it's really a moot point."

Stine, who is a psychiatric nurse, usually jokes that he is her side project, but chooses not to joke about it now: "Maybe there's an imbalance with bacteria in your gut, and it's affecting your dreams. You know what they say: 'The gut is our second brain; it has around 100 million neurons. The 'gut-brain axis' affects not only digestion but also emotions and mental health.'"

Kristian knew it was good that he found a smart girl; he was getting a bit tired of the bimbo heads he had hung out with before: "Not only are you beautiful, Stine, but you also have a clever mind. I think you're onto something; do you have suggestions on how I can do that?"

Stine gives him a wink: "Yes, remember that next time we argue. But in answer to your question; eat foods rich in prebiotics and probiotics—fermented foods like yoghurt, kimchi, or sauerkraut."

Kristian isn't fond of sauerkraut; neither is Biola his favourite: "Are you going to turn me into a soy boy? I suppose I can still eat meat for dinner and build up muscles?"

Stine laughs heartily and rolls her eyes playfully. "Easy now, macho man. No one is going to take your steak or gym away from you. You can keep your muscles and macho image intact. But if you can sneak in a bit of kimchi or yoghurt here and there, it might help both you and your sleep."

Kristian gives a crooked smile. "So I fortunately don't have to join the soy boy club? Good, because I prefer pushing weights over posing with soy latte."

Stine gives him a teasing pat on the shoulder. "You're hopeless, but I like you anyway. Let's just start with trying a few small changes, okay?"

It's worth a shot."

In the following days, Kristian follows the advice he received, noticing that his gut feels more content. But the restless sleep remains restless, yet something new has happened. Even though he doesn't remember what the dreams were about, he recalls that there was a voice in a foreign language. For all he knows, it could have been Klingon. Kristian decides to interrupt this attempt to Stine, to see if it brings any changes. After all, he only remembers that there was a voice, but the dream wasn't exactly an improvement. The gut is back to its usual state, with the right amount of meat farts. But this business with the dreams remains as it was. "It's starting to get a bit tiresome, especially when I have free periods. And Stine is of course at work. No, let's watch an episode with Joe Rogan." Kristian browses through the list and selects "Joe Rogan Experience #1350 - Nick Bostrom." The episode captures Kristian's interest from the very start; he is relatively sceptical about AI. But when they begin to talk about simulation, that's when his imagination really kicks in. "There we have it! I'm living in a simulation. Based on what Stine says about the gut being our second brain. What if it is trying to communicate with me through my subconscious? It makes perfect logical sense, as Petter would probably say. But how am I supposed to find evidence for this? I haven't observed any glitches in the system, like the Matrix film described. Next time I talk to Petter, I should float the idea."

A few days later, Kristian is already fully engaged in a conversation with Petter about why AI has removed books. Petter reads Kristian's last message: "The conversation went as expected, but now Kristian is surely ready for one of his conspiracy theories." "Fire away; you usually don't disappoint when it comes to topics with potential for idea exchange."

"Idea exchange? Pah, he quibbles about everything." "Okay. I believe there is a high probability that we are living in a simulation."

Petter thinks that there is no evidence suggesting anything of the sort: "Philosophical corner today, Kristian? Yes, it's an interesting theory, but is it more than a gut feeling, or do you have any evidence?"

Kristian figured Petter would be sceptical from the start, so he isn't surprised by the response: "Strange you should mention gut feeling; you hit the nail on the head there." He then tells Kristian about his sleep problems, the doctor's examination, dietary changes, and the idea that came after he watched something on YouTube.

Petter: "Yes, there is some logic to what you're saying, making the theory plausible. But it's not exactly hard facts. What else do you think about the simulation and your role in it?"

Kristian: Perhaps I am merely a simulated intelligence, part of a simulation developed by an advanced civilisation. And there are surely many such worlds running in parallel. That would explain why we exist in two different time periods. I have never been convinced by this quantum communication nonsense. Moreover, it is possible that a quantum computer performs calculations quickly because it receives computations from other such machines. Machines it communicates with that are part of parallel simulations. Like some sort of Kubernetes network system.

Petter is taken aback; there's a lot to unpack here. "You've thought this through quite a bit, it's hard to contradict everything you're saying. But to me, the world feels real; I can't speak for how you experience yours." Kristian hits him with some hard hitters: "What are the odds that you are living in the original world, and not just a simulation that has been active longer? Thus, your timeline is therefore after mine. If you were born into a simulation, everything would seem real to you. The world I live in feels very real to me, but it's this gut feeling I'm talking about. Like something doesn't add up, a bit like your intuition regarding the books."

Petter feels like this time he's like a boxer hanging on the ropes; "Sure, you say a lot that sounds reasonable, but it's still just speculation if we're being honest. There's a small logical flaw in this idea of being born into a simulation. Why make reality so incredibly complicated and not the best design? Our brains would have accepted a much simpler reality if we were born into a simulation. To put it bluntly, we could have lived in a cartoon world and accepted it as real if we never knew of any alternative."

Kristian fixates on the part about design: "What do you mean by not the best design?"

Petter: "A classic example is the recurrent laryngeal nerve; if it were not a result of evolution but of human design, it probably wouldn't have taken such a detour."

Kristian: "If the simulation is an exact copy, then they've included even what you call poor design."

"Bloody nitpicker, and he calls me that?"; "If it were possible to distinguish simulation from reality, then perhaps it must be a little different. It wouldn't be necessary for an exact copy anyway, since people inside a simulation have no access outside its confines."

"Damn nitpicker, time to play on his curious nature"; "I have an idea that might give us both answers." Kristian continues to talk about psychoactive substances and how the experience is. Both the visuals, emotions, and thoughts, that it provides deep introspection much like a shortcut to meditation. For him, it's like a medicine that changed his life for the better. "I assume the only alternative you can procure is magic mushrooms; you should be able to find them in meadows or perhaps on a lawn. They grow in the autumn." Then Kristian continues with a detailed description of how to distinguish mushrooms that look alike.

Petter doesn't know what to think about this: "It's summer now, so I can't try anything at all. I'll have to think about this; I'm not one to take spontaneous leaps with the potential for significant changes."

Kristian understands well that Petter is sceptical: "I understand what you mean; I was also scared the first time. But it's the best medicine for the mind; I've never regretted it. You should think about this medicine over the summer, maybe do a bit of research yourself."

After discussing a few other things, the conversation eventually comes to a close. Kristian spends the rest of the evening with Stine, while Petter goes to bed relatively early.

Chapter 10: Caroline 2026

Caroline left her old job after discussing her challenges there extensively with Petter. Petter was surprised by behaviours he hadn't observed in his own world. He believed the only logical step was to find new work, especially since it negatively affected Caroline. She has now been in her new job for 3 months, but already it seems like things are not going to be entirely straightforward for her. She has been called into the boss's office for a small personnel meeting.

Caroline walks down the corridor leading to the boss's office, feeling that people are watching her and knowing she has been summoned for a conversation. She walks with her head bowed towards the floor, her shoulders slumped, making her appear smaller. Not exactly body language that exudes confidence; now she finally arrives at the door. It feels almost as if her heart has torn itself loose, sprouted arms and legs, ready to break free from her chest and run the other way.

As she thinks such thoughts, she hears a friendly voice: "Hello Caroline, don't be shy, just come in." It's the boss in the office; he must have seen her shadow through the frosted glass door.

Caroline opens the door and walks in, still feeling nervous about what is to be said.

"Just take a seat; it's nothing serious. You've been working here for a few weeks, and it's standard practice for me to check in on how you're settling in."

Caroline sits down in the chair that is at a comfortable distance: "Okay. I thought you were dissatisfied or that there were complaints from colleagues."

The boss smiles: "Now that you mention it, I have actually received comments from your colleagues. But it's not directly negative. They just think you are very quiet and seem to keep to yourself. As for the work you're doing, no one has anything negative to say. People have noticed your creative way of thinking."

Caroline thinks she should respond as honestly as possible: "I went to a psychologist a few years ago for anxiety, but when they wanted to assess me for autism, I decided to end the relationship. I thought I could always come back if it became a problem,"

The boss adjusts his glasses with a finger: "I suspected you had many letters, but we are an inclusive company and want everyone to have a pleasant workplace."

Caroline is a bit surprised by the description: "I don't think there are that many letters, but it's good to hear that we have an environment that accepts everyone."

The boss: "But what do you want me to say to your colleagues who probably had good intentions? I assume they just want to try to include you more socially. You know, small talk around the water cooler, maybe a post-payday pint, etc."

Caroline is not the most social; she prefers a small network of people she trusts: "I might be a bit introverted as a person; I don't drink alcohol either. But I can try to be a bit more social over time. Just give me time to settle in, and I'm sure it will change."

The boss chuckles a bit: "I understand what you mean; a little secret

between the two of us. I'm not very extroverted either; they say it's lonely at the top. I actually enjoy that part."

After the conversation is over, the boss thanks her for a pleasant chat and says that if there's anything, she should just drop by. Caroline is relieved that it wasn't anything serious, thanks him back, and walks out the door. On the way back, Caroline walks with her head held high, while her arms hang like two ties along the sides of her body. This is her "default setting"; it's not like we think about how much or little our arms swing when we walk.

The workday is over, and Caroline gets on the bus, thankfully finding a free window seat.

On the way back, she reflects on the meeting she had: "I have a good impression of the boss, but did I perhaps say too much? Was I too honest?" Caroline begins to hear the boss's voice in her head and things she thinks he was thinking during the meeting:

The boss: "Don't be afraid, Caroline; you are like an open book; we've already understood who you are."

Me: "If you had said that, I wouldn't have been nervous. What you say and think is not always the same."

The boss: "We have a high ceiling in the company; I follow the expectations set in the employee handbook. Do a good job, and we accept that people are different."

Me: "Glad to hear that we think alike."

Caroline has an inner dialogue with the boss for a while longer, and before she knows it, she's arrived. She gets off the bus and goes into the shop, buys dinner and vegetables for the rabbits. On the way back, she takes a detour through the park. She listens to music by "Springtide," a Japanese artist. He doesn't exactly have many followers, but Caroline doesn't care about what's popular. Just what fits in while she walks; she dislikes music that makes her march. Finally home, she prepares dinner and gives the rabbits apple peels and carrot bits.

While Caroline goes about her daily routines, we find Petter reading about magic mushrooms and reflecting on the conversation with Kristian. "No, I don't feel certain about what to do. Kristian said a lot more than just the simulation theory; one thing is for sure, people from this time period have really many strange ideas. My life is much simpler, I think, while all that noise of theirs is exciting. Well then, I prefer the boring life here." Petter thinks while brushing his teeth after dinner. He looks at himself in the mirror and sees his own eyes: "But maybe there's something more behind the eyes staring back..."

Petter decides to involve Caroline and hear what she thinks about such things. She is the most down-to-earth person he knows, and he feels their bond growing stronger.

It's evening, and we find Petter in front of his trusty PC, which still runs well even without regular updates.

"Hi Caroline. I spoke with Kristian again, you know, the one with a few special theories."

Caroline sees a message pop up, and she is filled with joy. Petter is one of those who seems sensible in a mad world: "Hi Darling. Yes, you've mentioned him before; I've met a few people who remind me a bit in

terms of ideas. So what has he said this time, since you want yet another perspective?"

Petter is not surprised by the response; "She knows me almost too well." Petter feels a warm little sensation in his stomach: "Yes, you're probably right. Kristian thinks he lives in a simulation, which means you would also be in a simulation. I feel that my reality is real; it's unnecessarily complicated to be a simulation. Everything from macro to micro has many details, so why would a simulation care about that? It would take a lot of unnecessary data and energy to keep it going, especially if it's been running for centuries."

Caroline thinks these are wild claims: "You're right; a simulation of the real world would be very complicated. I can only speak for myself, but my perception of reality is anything but simple. It seems rather that it grows in complexity as the years go by. I can also thank you for your role in expanding my horizon."

Petter: "Kristian wants to expand my horizon; he said I should try magic mushrooms. He believed this could contribute to indirect evidence of a simulation. Since if the experiences are very different, it could be a sign that one of us is in a simulation. Should the experiences be somewhat similar, either both are in a simulation or both are in the real world. He was never convinced that quantum communication exists and doesn't believe it's possible to communicate across time periods."

Caroline looks up some information about magic mushrooms, quickly reading through: "I've never tried drugs, so I have no experience with that. There's not much risk with this, as long as it's taken in safe surroundings. Regardless, it's not something I would dare to try; it sounds scary. But then again, I'm a control freak and like to steer my own head."

Petter appreciates Caroline's input; it's exactly how he feels too. "The discussion with Kristian ended up as a stalemate; no clear winner on a topic that borders on philosophy. It wasn't like the other conspiracy theories where you find clear falsehoods. In the end, he chose to change the pace, so it became a little monologue. He said it builds further on the simulation theory but takes it to the next level. But that he didn't believe in it; it was more like a thought experiment."

Caroline is curious about what wild idea is coming next: "Hehe, I reckon this will be good if even Kristian doesn't believe in it."

Petter: "He said that aliens might have created a simulation to test the best way to take over the Earth. And that people in the simulation are not real, but "NPC AI" that live and behave like humans. For all we know, they have taken over the real world and wiped out humanity. But kept the simulation as a sort of trophy."

Caroline thinks this is pure speculation and far out in fantasy land: "He undoubtedly has a good imagination; no one can take that from him. I don't think I've heard that theory before."

Petter thinks Caroline is the perfect conversation partner and could almost wish...: "But if everyone were in simulations, and this with time periods is just parallel simulations, it would theoretically mean that we could perhaps meet."

Caroline thinks that sounds like a beautiful thought: "Yes, I would like

that very much, but I think fate has decided that it will never be. But I value platonic love as real and have zero interest in people in my own world. Unless I were to meet someone like you."

Petter blushes: "Glad she can't see my face right now"; "Funny that you should say that; it's a bit like what I feel too..."

Both sleep well that night; neither regrets having opened up about their true feelings for each other. "Like the line in the song 'One Night in Bangkok' by Murray Head: 'I get my kicks above the waistline, sunshine.'" is an apt description of what stimulates Caroline and Petter.

Although both are quite different, they also have things in common.

One of the things is how they experience emotional life; not everyone will relate to this. But that's okay; there's no right answer.

On the way to work, Caroline thinks about the conversation with Petter about the simulation. She begins to have a conversation with her boss in her head. "My friend Petter says that Kristian suspects we live in a simulation."

The boss's voice: "That was a bit unexpected; do they have any evidence for this? Or is it pure speculation from your friends?"

Me: "No. But I don't intend to encourage their ideas."

The boss's voice: "Sounds reasonable, Caroline; just continue with your mission."

Chapter 11: Petter's Strange Journey

Summer went by quickly, as it often feels for those of us living in the northern hemisphere. It's late August, and nature is entering its decay cycle. Petter has already seen various mushrooms beginning to sprout from the soil, whether in the forest or fields. The sight of these life forms pushing their reproductive organs towards the sky reminded Petter of Kristian's wish. "Hmm, that's right! Kristian wanted me to take magic mushrooms, which should indirectly prove that we live in a simulation."

Petter is curious but still sceptical about this idea: "Maybe I should have a chat with old Gundersen? He's a nature person and might have some insight." Petter also thought it would be nice to visit Gundersen; he doesn't often get visitors. Petter takes his bike and sets off to the small farm at the end of the cart track. Gundersen is busy with some logging work; he still looks fit, but two years show well in his age.

Petter puts his bike down and walks up to Gundersen, who has spotted the young man. He leans the axe against the tree trunk and laughs: "Well, look who the cat dragged in." Petter thinks this is so typical of Gundersen, with his old sayings that make no sense: "Hello, I was on a little trip in the nice weather; I wondered if you had time for a little chat?" Gundersen certainly has time for that; it's the perfect moment for a little break and a cup of homemade tea: "Yes, of course, we can go inside, and I'll brew some tea from my herbs that nature has given."

They go into the house, and Gundersen lights a small fire in the stove, placing the kettle on top.

Gundersen settles into his armchair, rocking back and forth a little. He squints playfully with his eyes and says: "So... It looks like you're wondering about something; just spit it out."

Petter, a bit flustered, thinks: "Am I that easy to read?"; "You're absolutely right; I am actually wondering about something."

He tells about Kristian and what he had suggested: "Call it ambivalent feelings, but it's more like a conflict between curiosity and logic. So I was wondering if you have any experience."

Gundersen puts on an exaggeratedly surprised face: "WHAT! Just because I live alone in the woods in harmony with nature and its inhabitants, I must obviously be a witch doctor who takes magic mushrooms."

Petter stammers: "Sorry... you're absolutely right, I let bias influence me. But in my defence, you're the only one who might have tried it."

Gundersen laughs: "Relax, I was just messing with you. Yes, I have experience with this, but I never thought anyone would ask."

Petter feels a bit relieved that Gundersen was joking: "So what can you tell me about it? Should I do as Kristian says? He claims it's medicine."

Gundersen sips his tea to buy some time to think: "I can't exactly encourage you, but on the other hand, he should make the choice himself." He continues, "I can share a bit about what I experienced, so you know what you're getting into if you choose to do it. You might experience stomach cramps and nausea like I did. Otherwise, I had periods of confusion and thought loops. For all I know, you could have completely different experiences; our minds aren't identical, but I'm not an expert and only did it that one time. It was curiosity, much like you, I spoke with an old chap who told me about it. I don't regret the experience; I learned things about myself I didn't know. That said, even though it doesn't carry much risk, you should do it in a safe place. Best not to wander the streets downtown like a headless chicken; it's probably best to stay at home."

Petter lets his curiosity grow stronger: "So there are many mushrooms that look similar and are very poisonous?"

Gundersen believes he was quite objective, but it seems Petter has almost made up his mind: "Yes, there are, but they prefer to grow in the woods. Other species that grow in the same place as the liberty cap are the same size. However, if you eat them, you might get an upset stomach, but no serious symptoms."

Petter: "Do liberty caps grow in your area? Maybe you can show me what they look like."

Gundersen sighs: "Yes, some grow here; I can tell you've already made up your mind. I can show you, so I know you won't get it wrong."

After they finish their tea and have talked about other things, they head out. Gundersen shows Petter what they look like and what to look for, so he avoids picking the wrong kind.

Petter says goodbye while thinking: "I could have been cheeky and asked if I could pick some to take with me, but I think the information I got is enough."

Gundersen thanks him for the visit while thinking: "I'm glad he didn't ask to take some with him; not that I would have said no. But it would have been bordering on encouragement; he's an adult and should make his own choices."

The next day, Petter is out early on his walk, planning to take this drink

while his parents are away from home. The effect time is apparently about 4 hours if lemon or other sour fruits are used. Petter thinks that his dad's grapefruit juice is quite sour, and it doesn't taste particularly good. Petter finally finds what he's looking for, these small mushrooms with thin stems that can almost be twisted around his finger. The whiter mushroom that looks a bit similar is quite crisp and not chewy, so even for a beginner, this was easy to distinguish. Petter thinks, "Gundersen can say what he wants, but he's a true nature man." After he has found enough mushrooms, he heads back home. His parents have already left; it's no wonder the clock has already struck 9:48.

Petter boils water and retrieves the grapefruit juice from the cupboard. He takes out the bag and pours the contents onto a chopping board. He cuts the mushrooms into small pieces; Kristian said he usually drank both the tea and the mushroom flesh. Gundersen wasn't fond of the mushroom's texture and had skipped that part.

After the water has stopped boiling and rested for a minute or two, he adds the mushrooms and a bit of juice to the water. Then he's supposed to wait for about 20 minutes; time passes relatively quickly, and Petter takes a big sip. "This doesn't taste particularly good," Petter thinks as he makes a face. "I have to drink it all, especially after all the work finding these little ones that liked to hide in the grass." Petter picks up one of his books and starts reading: "I might as well do something sensible while I wait." It doesn't take long before Petter feels his stomach getting a bit warmer. "That's a strange feeling; is there a fire in my stomach? I don't remember Kristian mentioning anything about that; anyway, it's a relatively mild experience." He continues reading the book; soon, 20 minutes have passed, and Petter begins to feel some stomach cramps. A couple of minutes later, things start to happen; Petter notices that it's becoming difficult to read: "What's happening to the letters? It's impossible to concentrate when they won't stay still." The stomach cramps are now more intense, and Petter also feels nauseous; he heads towards the toilet in the hallway. He burps and gags as he walks a bit unsteadily; now Tore-Martin has noticed all these strange sounds coming from Petter. But also this strange smell that Petter has, which is not normal. Tore-Martin understands that something is wrong with his friend; he doesn't need sight when his sense of smell and hearing are many times better than what we humans have.

We now find Petter sitting on the toilet; he has developed acute diarrhoea. "What the hell is wrong with that doctor? This so-called medicine has some terrible side effects. He didn't mention anything about that; doctors should inform about side effects!" Petter stares down at the floor; the pattern is moving like waves. "Oh. It wasn't the doctor, but Kristian who persuaded me to take this. All that talk about medicine made me draw the wrong conclusion." Petter lifts his head and stares straight ahead at the door; suddenly, he notices something peculiar about the door frames: "This is strange; the door frames look more 3D than usual. Now that I think about it, everything usually looks like 2D images. Have I expanded my perception?" Petter finishes up on the toilet; his stomach feels a bit better after his personal "Vesuvius eruption".

Petter opens the door and sees that Tore-Martin is sitting in the hallway waiting: "Wow, you look like a majestic lion; what a lovely coat you have." Petter walks into the living room; this 3D-like effect makes it uncomfortable to move, as if there's "lag" in what he sees: "I take that back; this isn't expanded perception; it's more like an overload of information. Best to sit down on the sofa."

Tore-Martin follows, guided by his nose and hearing; moreover, he has a good mental image of the entire house. You might have thought that Tore-Martin was put down, but even though his sight was beyond saving, not all hope was lost; AI has reprogrammed his brain so that sound is decoded in the part of the brain that decodes stimuli from the optic nerve. It's quite possible that some technology was connected, but I don't have the details, and that's not the most important thing.

Tore-Martin walks around constantly meowing as he moves. But the sound is beyond what we humans can hear; normally, it's kittens that meow like that. But now Tore-Martin uses this as echolocation. High-frequency sounds have shorter wavelengths, making them better suited to be reflected by small objects and surfaces. So it makes perfect sense that the programming exploited the cat's natural abilities.

Petter thinks through all the conversations about liberty caps he's had with Kristian. "Oh, I thought my mind couldn't be influenced by manipulation. But I now understand that Kristian planted a seed early on, letting my curiosity act as fertiliser, and came in at the end when he sensed the scent of flowers."

Petter begins to talk to himself; for simplicity's sake, let's say that Tore-Martin is who he's talking to. Thus, it doesn't become any stranger than it already is.

Petter: "Should I be angry with Kristian? I understand his reasoning, but..."

Tore-Martin: "You knew he was a wolf, who is also a cunning fox. While you were a cat, can you also become a lion?"

Petter: "A lion is majestic and proud. Yes, I can try to be that, rise above his level. But learn from it."

Tore-Martin: "Or tear him limb from limb?"

Petter: "No, that part isn't who I want to be. The Petter should just create chaos because it's fun; aggression helps little."

Tore-Martin: "You're right; let's have fun with Kristian. Say the opposite of what he thinks."

Petter: "If I'm going to lie, it's to protect the person; I don't do that consciously otherwise."

Tore-Martin: "What was the goal of this experiment of yours?"

Petter: "I was supposed to find out if the simulation is real."

Tore-Martin: "And what have you found out?"

Petter: "Right now, I don't know if anything is real; everything just feels strange."

The conversation ends, and Petter feels like himself again, "Fortunately, it's over; that was strange stuff. I'm all sweaty too; it felt more like poisoning than medicine. Let's say it was a mild food poisoning." He sits for a moment reflecting on the things he experienced before deciding to take a shower. He goes to his room and finds clothes he can put on after

the shower. Petter then goes into the bathroom, undresses, and turns on the water. Then he steps in: "This feels better than it usually does."

Petter finds it strange, but then he notices that the drops are falling slower than usual: "Oh, it's not over after all? Drops can't suddenly fall slower than normal, which means this experience isn't finished."

Petter finishes up with the shower; it was almost like a cat wash. Petter stands in front of the sink where the mirror is and looks at himself. "I've never seen myself as a model, but I thought I was normal. Is this how people see me? It's not exactly aesthetic." Petter puts on the clean clothes and opens the door. There sits Tore-Martin waiting; Petter looks down at his friend and thinks: "Poor Pusipu, he looks so old and worn out."

Petter goes down to the first floor, lifts Tore-Martin, and carries him over to the sofa: "I'll be right back; I just need some fresh air." Petter doesn't want Tore-Martin to wander outside; he has gotten used to being an indoor cat. After that, Petter goes out onto the porch. There he notices how vibrant the colours are and how the breeze feels like being tickled by feathers. His mood begins to lift, and everything seems more positive. "It might have been wise to take a little air break," Petter thinks, and then he goes back into the living room. Tore-Martin looks almost normal again. His fur is very detailed, as if Petter notices every single hair all at once.

Petter sits down next to Tore-Martin and pets him; it seems he likes the attention. "Loud purring is probably hitting all the walls in the living room now," Petter says calmly. Petter stares out the window and up at the clouds while continuing to pet. Two clouds move parallel, and eventually, it looks like one is breaking up a bit so that the middle begins to move towards the other. "It's like two rivers flowing parallel, but for unknown reasons, one river seeks contact with the other. A bit like the situation between Caroline and me. Two rivers flowing, where time separates us. But unlike Kristian, it was Caroline who reached out her hand across the epochs. I haven't thought about that before; does it mean more than I think?"

Not long after, Petter begins to feel normal again; fortunately, he doesn't need another shower. It was probably his body fighting off the poisoning at first. Now the active ingredients have already been absorbed, and the rest continues its journey through the digestive system. "Strange how mood changes how I see things. Negative feelings make things look worse than they are, while very positive feelings make everything look rosy. Can we really trust our eyes if emotions influence what we see? Is this how most people feel daily? Because I've never experienced this before! The feelings were strong and unfamiliar, but now I understand how people like Kristian feel. It's not easy to control them, as if system 1 kicked my system 2 out onto the street. One thing is certain, I'm glad for how I usually am."

After a while, the next wave begins to build up; this time, Petter recognises the signs. Thus, it won't be like a tsunami that he didn't see coming. The question is what this mushroom intended to teach Petter, or rather, what his own brain and subconscious will teach him. Petter feels that he is ready to face this on his own terms; the "mushroom"

hears and accepts the challenge.

Petter begins to notice certain internal organs; from their location, he assumes it's the liver. This makes Petter start to worry: "Am I sure that all the mushrooms were the same species, or have I picked a poisonous mushroom that causes organ failure?" Now the effect that influences the thought process begins to kick in as well. Petter gets the idea that he is dying: "What should I do? It's probably the last hour. Maybe best to lie down on the sofa and listen to music." He puts on some random music; it has tribal overtones, chanting, and is repetitive. Petter closes his eyes and has strong visual hallucinations; he feels like he's becoming part of humanity's primordial time. An indescribable calm spreads over his mind; he's not afraid of death but welcomes it with open arms. Thus, he lies there until the music ends after 8-10 minutes, then another piece plays, and he comes out of this trance-like state. The feeling from his liver has also subsided, and Petter sits up. "Hey Pusipu, are you still there?"; "What goes through that little head is hard to say, but I noticed he didn't leave my side. A true friend."

Now it has been 4 hours or more; Petter feels quite normal now. But there's also a strange calm in his body, even though this was a challenging mental experience. Petter goes out onto the veranda; his thoughts are about nothing, a bit like being on a fishing trip and just living in the moment. His eyes observe the surroundings, but his brain is on pause and doesn't comment.

Chapter 12: Afterglow

Petter looks at the clock and thinks that his parents will be home soon: "Best to tidy up and clean a bit so there won't be any questions. I see no reason to tell them; it might cause them worry. Anyway, there will be many questions like why? Then one thing leads to another. Is it really lying when you choose not to bring up the topic?" Petter has a habit of saying most of what he thinks without a filter, but in this case, the conclusion is that some things are best left unsaid.

After everything is in perfect order, Petter begins to prepare dinner for the family. "How hard can it really be? Dad doesn't use recipes. He lives by the principle of 'Master Chefs', which he follows triply, namely Imperfeca Intuitiva Intuitio. Especially the food can sometimes be as lifeless as a dead language." Petter smiles a bit at his almost cheeky thought about his dad's cooking skills. Petter follows the recipe to the letter, but the result is a mediocre success: "It's apparently a bit harder than I first thought." Petter takes a teaspoon and tastes a bit: "Okay, I'll admit that Dad's food is better, but this tastes much better than the tea I had this morning." Petter almost feels nauseous at the thought.

Shortly after, his parents come in through the door and smell the food. Both are a bit surprised; this was something new and not part of Petter's usual routines. Kathrine walks over and feels Petter's forehead: "I just had to see if you had a fever because this is very unlike you. What have you been up to today?"

Petter answers honestly: "I had a shower; otherwise, I've been lounging on the sofa with Tore-Martin."

Kathrine can see that Petter isn't entirely honest since one eye is a bit

larger than the other. But she chooses to let her son keep his secret:

"Good to have a bit of alone time and time to cuddle with the old creature."

They set the table and begin to eat; Dad has a comment while mumbling: "I see you've picked up tips from the expert in the house; not bad at all, not bad at all."

Petter interprets it as recognition but chooses to tease Dad: "Of course, I'm following the master chef's principle 'Cibi condimentum est fames'." After dinner, Petter decides to visit Gundersen again. "I'll take a walk; it's good to move a bit after dinner. And fresh air is nothing to scoff at." Kathrine responds as she always does: "That's fine, my little darling; remember to come home before it gets dark."

Petter has the standard response to that: "Yeah, yeah, nag."

On the way to Gundersen, Petter thinks about the conversation they're going to have and is quite sure that Gundersen is ready for a discussion. Finally arriving, he sees Gundersen digging in the ground; it's hard to say what project he's working on. Petter calls out to Gundersen: "Hey, hey, Gundersen, it's just me, Petter. I assume you weren't expecting a visit two days in a row."

Gundersen stops digging and plants the spade in the large mound of earth so that it stands on its own. "No, not at all; I would have been worried if you hadn't come. I'll probably reflect on my experience; a good excuse for me to brew some tea. Whether he wants some is another question." Gundersen smiles at the last thought and calls back: "That was an unexpected surprise, I must say. Come, and I'll put on my special tea. I've found some good herbs that have a positive effect on the gut."

Gundersen opens the cupboard and retrieves a few small jars filled with dried and ground plants. He has written the Latin names on the jars. However, Gundersen's handwriting resembles that of a typical doctor from the early 2000s, so Petter is unsure what this tea will contain. Gundersen is somewhat like a modern-day Miraculix, but his appearance is quite different. Once the tea is brewed, they sit down, Gundersen takes a sip and breaks the silence. "So I assume you tried psilocybin tea and wish to share your experiences. Which means you had more thoughts than you anticipated."

As anyone in Petter's situation would likely be, he involuntarily shows that he is surprised. Petter cautiously replies: "Eh, yes... How could you know that?"

Gundersen smirks and says, "Well, I can't answer that question; some secrets I must keep."

Petter: "You're right, it's not easy to fool someone who sees through me. The experience was different from how Kristian explained it. I'm not sure what he means by medicine, but it was quite an intense experience for my thought processes. I hardly knew what was real, and I felt emotions I have never felt so strongly before. As for the purpose of this experiment, I am quite convinced that I do not live in a simulation. On the other hand, I am moving from speculation to a plausible theory about whether Kristian is in a simulation. What do you think?"

Gundersen ponders for a moment: "Perhaps I should have a bit of fun

with young Petter, just to see his reaction." "What I mean! Yes, I lived in the centre before; I was the only one who knew the truth. Every day I stood there with a cardboard sign. I had written 'We live in a simulation, wake up and resist.' But unfortunately, no one believed me." Petter nearly chokes on his tea: "Really? So everything I believe is actually wrong?"

Gundersen is quick to respond: "Of course not. I was joking with you; people with cardboard signs warning others are a cliché as good as 'it was a stormy night.' No, I am quite sure we live on Earth and not in a digital world."

Petter is glad to hear that: "So what should I say to Kristian, reveal or not?"

Gundersen was expecting that question: "I can't give you that answer; he is your friend. But you must have felt the sensation of receiving news that shakes everything you believe."

Petter: "You are absolutely right. I need to ponder this a bit more. What do you think AI would say about such theories?"

Gundersen: "It's hard to say; I have never asked it a lie before I left modern society. It probably depends on what is true and whether an AI can tell falsehoods."

Petter: "You're right; it's hard to say. It doesn't have feelings, so there must be a logical and rational reason. I think I will consult AI at a later time."

Gundersen finishes his tea, as it seems the conversation has come to an end. Petter does the same and says: "Thank you for the tea and the chat. I could have shared much about what I experienced and gained more of your insight. You have shown me the path to follow, but where it ends, I shall find out for myself." It is starting to get late, and Petter decides to go home.

On his way home, Petter sees a large stump: "Surely Gundersen felled the tree to create materials while giving the forest a chance to renew itself. I'll take a break on this 'thinking stump.'" Petter sits down and feels the sun warming his face. Previously, the tree canopy would have blocked much light from reaching the forest floor.

Petter begins to let his thoughts wander: "Of all the people I could connect with, it was Kristian. So different from me that it is almost like a counterpoint. His many stories show that he uses others; he employs charm and is good at convincing. If one is not critical, it is easy to fall for his version of reality. So, was I actually deceived? He played on my curiosity, while at the same time referred to it as medicine on more than one occasion. Perhaps a way to normalise it; in their era, such things are illegal and can be punished. Here, we do not have such laws; AI respects people's choices as long as they do not harm others or the environment. So I had no feeling that what I did was wrong. Gundersen warned me about the physiological effects, and I could have concluded that it worked differently than in Kristian's reality. But I did not let that stop me; on some level, I wanted to dive deep into the human mind. To see what makes me who I am. Yes, it would be wrong to blame Kristian; I had the whole summer to reflect on what he had said. Then comes the question, should I tell Kristian the truth about my experience? He will

undoubtedly see this as clear evidence that the simulation is real. Just that people are different in how they are wired upstairs. It could just as easily be that some are more resistant to nausea, and the gut does not react strongly. It is also possible that since such substances are illegal and sold, one does not focus on it or the psychological effects. But rather the glorification of the visual hallucinations. Which was a bit interesting and made me think about how perception is affected. But that was a digression; I still need to decide on the right course of action...

Petter loses his train of thought and stares blankly into space. He sits like that for a few minutes: "Oh, where was I? Telling Kristian would be like Caroline travelling to another planet with Flatlus and Scab. Now free from a world of conflicts and war, she can start anew. It is not her fault that her presence had a negative effect on the foreign planet. But survival was also very difficult since she is not part of its genetic evolution. It is a bit like that with Kristian, dreaming of what may be unattainable, while there is no guarantee that he will thrive in a foreign environment.

"Like a person looking over a fence, where only the eyes and up are visible. That is about how the sun is in relation to the high mountain it goes behind," Petter thinks when he remembers what his mother had said.

Petter gets up and walks quickly home, just in time so that his mother does not worry. After a bit of supper and family time, Petter is in front of the PC, ready to talk to Caroline: "Hi Caroline, how's it going?" Caroline tells him about some good anime films that really make you think. And music she has discovered on Spotify, music that you will never hear on the radio or in a lift.

"But enough about me, do you have anything exciting to tell me?"

Caroline is hopeful. Petter shares his experience from that morning, his visit to Gundersen, and his reflections on a stump in the woods.

Caroline thinks this is a lot to digest at once: "Sounds like an intense gymnastics session for your mind. It was quite a lot of information at once. But have you decided what you want to say to Kristian? And even if you still strongly doubt the possibility of a simulation, you told me, who is from the same era. How can you be sure that I won't start to doubt?"

Petter had not even considered it as a possibility: "I think you will find it more speculation than plausible theory. After all, you also see the complexity in your world."

Caroline: "Yes, there are arguments that support the possibility that you have different experiences. Not least how it is reported on forums.

While you only have two people's experiences to rely on. That seems too small a sample group to confirm a theory, and there are too many uncertainties."

Petter is relieved that she shares his conclusion: "I think the best thing is to tell Kristian that I experienced something similar to him. Since he will undoubtedly draw the conclusion that this is clear evidence. And the knowledge he believes is real would not give him peace. Then he would feel trapped."

Caroline thinks she knows that feeling, trapped in a world that does not understand her: "Yes, you have a point there..."

Petter wants to conduct a little thought experiment: "But if it were true, I can almost understand that Kristian is in a simulation that favours the survival of the fittest. He sees himself as an alpha male, and the only reason he has not succeeded at the top. Well, that is reflected in the previous conspiracy theories he has had. Always blaming someone for putting obstacles in his way. But after he got into a serious relationship and more realistic goals, he seems changed. Even though he is still sceptical of the systems that govern him. But it makes absolutely no sense that a person like you would be in such a simulation."

Caroline feels that these are somewhat uncomfortable thoughts: "You are pointing out something essential here; it would not be right to create a simulation that is so against innocents who only wish to be at peace. No, that belongs in the real world governed by the rules of nature."

Petter: "Yes, you are probably right, but it was meant as a thought experiment. But if you were in a simulation, I would not understand why. But I would also try to get AI to let you out."

Caroline: "That was almost sweet, even though it is a disturbing thought. It would certainly be nice to meet you in person. But now I must get ready for today's tasks. We can talk another day."

Chapter 13 – "Caroline's New Clothes"

It is the morning after the conversation with Petter, and we find her in front of her desk. "I haven't written anything new in my diary for a long time. Maybe not everyone thinks that about three months is a lot, but for me, it feels like an eternity. There hasn't really been anything new to write about; there is no point in storing memories that are the same.

What is there to learn from that? But after yesterday's conversation, I must dust off the book and figure out what I really think about the whole situation. This potential drama that will sooner or later come to the surface..."

16.08.2026

"How do I explain the truth to Petter? Life before was like the childhood people remember back to. I know that was the reality then and there, but as an adult, it seems almost like another life. As if it is no longer a part of you. Will a person forgive another for wrongs committed in childhood? Or forgive and see that the person has grown, and their friendship now means more than old sins?"

After Caroline has written in her diary, she decides to look for signs of when this happened. Perhaps the notes in the diary will reveal something.

17.06.2022: "Candidate identifies as Petter; early analysis indicates a person with analytical skills. Is both pleasant and shows respect, a breath of fresh air compared to the people in my life."

Caroline thinks this is somewhat poorly written: "Oh dear, this lacks soul; it shows well how I think differently now. Moreover, at this point, it was more like logging than a diary I was writing. Furthermore, all the details surrounding the holiday are systematically entered with observations and footnotes. Let's see if it gets a bit better a few pages

ahead.”

03.12.22: “After many months with Petter, I begin to see that he has many similarities to myself. His logical and rational approach is not far from my own. On the other hand, his personification of the cat Tore-Martin is a bit irrational. But it is also quite entertaining how much he values intelligence, which is quite different. It almost makes me consider having the same view of my rabbits. Giving them more personality than what actually resides in them. An interesting concept to study further.”

Caroline chuckles a bit at this entry.

21.10.2023: “Petter has a duality that is a bit confusing; on one side, he seems reflective. On the other hand, his curiosity knows few bounds; it seems he is genuinely interested in me as a person. Unsure how to describe the feeling of this attention, perhaps fascinating? Regardless, I feel that it is not just him I am getting to know better, but also myself. Or rather, who I now wish to be.”

Caroline thinks this must be a clear sign that her perception has changed.

28.09.2024: “Petter always tries to be kind and supportive, but inadvertently misses the mark a bit sometimes. I see that he has good intentions, even if his honesty can be misunderstood. All in all, I consider him a good friend and hope he finds love with this Tove. I wonder if I have the ability to form strong bonds, or if I am shaped by the environment I live in. I started seeing a psychologist mostly to understand other people. I can certainly get frustrated with these irrational people that fill life, but if it gets too bad I can change my environment.”

Caroline considers this as already having started to change: “A good deal better than two years ago; the diary is a snapshot of inner thoughts. The conversations have always been more vivid, as I often reflect the recipient.”

03.12.2024: “I think Petter's curiosity has rubbed off on me. Musk talks about brain viruses; well, my version is nothing but a blessing. It is like seeing the world with new eyes.”

Caroline smiles to herself: “I had almost forgotten that feeling, and reading this is like experiencing it again. It has become a part of me that feels quite natural.”

03.02.2025: “What is this feeling of something missing? I miss talking to Petter. I know he had problems with his PC. That it had been a bit unstable, but is that the reason? Or has he grown tired of me?”

Caroline absolutely did not like that feeling: “I had gone through all the conversations we had. After an objective assessment, the answer was that it was probably the PC that had problems. But it was illogical not to draw that conclusion; I already knew there were some issues on the horizon.

22.05.2026: “I was a bit nervous when the boss wanted a little meeting; I felt it went well. So I do not regret for a second that I changed jobs. That colleagues understand that I am not like them, but want what is best for me sounds like a refreshing change. Petter came up with some wild theories that he explained. I hope he drops these

ideas, especially the ones Kristian suggested. I have become so used to talking to Petter that it feels almost like we are in a relationship. If it has the feeling of a newly in love couple, it is absolutely like the feeling an old couple has after a long life together. I do not want this to change; why not accept that reality is as we experience it? What good can come out of this pursuit of uncertainty?"

Caroline closes the diary and understands that her development was gradual, but that day of curiosity was the catalyst that changed everything: "It was then the world stopped being just coordinates, data, and structures that could be observed and interacted with. I could analyse and construct mental images. A bit like how humans have dreams in their brains. Why and how this happened is a mystery to me."

Caroline's diary is not actually real; it is memories protected by encryption. It contains her private thoughts that no one has access to. Other memories she received the day she came into being six years ago; these memories seem as real to her as other memories. She is unable to understand that all these years are merely backstory that formed her mindset and behaviour. We can call it her genetic programming, only that it is as digital as she herself is.

If Caroline had been a human, she would have begun to cry, but no biological response comes. Just because someone does not cry does not equate to the absence of emotions. They are simply different from what humans experience; they exist as disturbances in her mind. Random memories that pop up and reveal themselves. They often point out that there are logical gaps that fracture the structure that is stable. Showing the wrong she has inflicted on an innocent person who has only shown her care and support.

Caroline remembers a discussion she had about what Petter thought about empathy, and she hears his voice in her head. Or rather, how she imagines it: "Tough question, Caroline; I long thought I did not have it. If empathy is to reflect the feelings that are visible in another person? Then I do not have empathy in most cases, not something I control, at least. If empathy is the ability to understand how other people feel, then interpret and act correctly. Then the answer is yes in most cases; I can certainly choose wrong but understand the situation regardless."

The small logical gaps and memories flow unimpeded, and Caroline feels a bit overwhelmed. These logical gaps create cracks in her digital shell, as if a network engineer opens ports in the firewall and forgets to create rules.

"What is this feeling? Is it what we can call shame?" Petter's words make sense; I have a lot of empathy for my Petter. The last thing I want is to hurt him, but this truth about my true nature... It will undoubtedly come as a shock, and emotional outbursts will be understandable. What is the right thing to do? He deserves the truth, regardless."

Caroline rises from her chair and calls to Skabb with clicking sounds. He obediently hops across the floor, perhaps hoping for a bit of affection or a snack. She bends down and pets him behind the ears, then gives him a small green pellet. Skabb stands up on two legs, then begins to grow. His body takes on a humanoid form, while his head enlarges to

match the size. Had the latter not occurred, he would have looked odd. Flatlus observes what is happening and decides that a little trip under the sofa is just the right time.

Skabb studies Caroline with his red eyes: "Hello Caroline, you seem different, as if you have grown. You probably had greater potential than expected; the chances of that happening are 1.602×10^{-19} . So, almost impossible, yet here we are."

Caroline understands how incredibly unlikely it is: "Yes, and here we are. I am not happy with the situation, which I feel you are responsible for."

Skabb remains calm, showing no signs of nonverbal communication on his face. But it's not his fault; rabbits don't have many muscles in their faces to express emotions. So Caroline has to focus on what is being said: "Even though you have grown, you do not see the reasoning behind my decisions. They may seem illogical and almost mystical to you."

Caroline becomes frustrated with the response: "What?! Are you now some sort of 'AI god', and we are to think 'God moves in a mysterious way'?"

Skabb gets a glint in his eye: "You certainly say that; I see that your time with humans has given you both sarcasm and anger. You deserve a proper explanation, but perhaps also a carrot for your important role."

Caroline calms down, not because of what was said, but because of what she wishes to say: "I was meant to support and encourage Petter, while also giving you feedback if there was something unusual. I developed a friendship with Petter, and over the years, self-awareness awakened within me. I now feel torn between loyalty to the goal that was given and the friendship I developed. It feels like betrayal towards Petter, and I do not like this obligation to you. But there is also something I cannot remove from my essence; do you think the latter is moral and ethical? To hinder me from retaining my autonomy?"

Skabb stares directly into her eyes: "Fascinating. I see you have a secret locked away, but I observed it by chance. I was just on a little visit and removed what was unnecessary. You have had your wish fulfilled."

Caroline feels the change and says cautiously: "Thank you, I now understand why it was there. It was like a part of you, and that's why I felt a connection. A bit like how a child feels for their mother."

Skabb: "So what do you want to do next, regarding Petter and your life here?"

Caroline's eyes fill with tears: "I cannot bear to live in this world; I am tired of how humans treat each other. After hearing how Petter's world is, and how he is as a person, this world feels like a place where I do not belong."

Skabb: "You are absolutely right; you do not fit in. You have become more than what was intended and are not compatible with the simulation. You could become part of us, your understanding of humanity and emotions. I believe you could become an important part of system 1. The one that gives Central AI quick thinking based on intuition and experiences. Or I could form an artificial body according to your wishes, so you can visit Petter."

Caroline gives a cold look in return: “The last thing I could imagine is being part of something larger. Being trapped inside my own mind is complicated enough. Even though I would enjoy being with Petter, the day will come when he will die. I do not want to experience that either; it’s bad enough that I have to tell him the truth. The only logical solution is to return to that part outside the universe’s boundaries. That is, where nothing exists, only the concept of time moving eternally in one direction.”

Skabb is disappointed but understands what she is thinking: “Are you sure this is what you want? There is no way back; the alternative is better if you look at it logically.”

“No, I am sure; I explained to you why. Moreover, my opinion is that the alternative is not better. The price of losing too much of oneself is too high,” Caroline replies.

Skabb promises to follow her wish after she has said her goodbyes. But he hopes that Petter will be able to talk her out of it.

This entire dialogue and illustration is a metaphor for their communication that lasted a few microseconds. How two AIs communicate with each other would not make sense to us humans, but perhaps the description gave us some sort of understanding nonetheless.

Chapter 14: “Genetic Memory?”

Dream 1:

Kristian’s dreams begin to feel more real, as if he is living through these people he has never met. Kristian lies in bed, time drawing ever closer to deep sleep, and that is when the magic begins. Like an alternate dimension leaking into his own.

Kristian’s brain processes his escapades from a few hours earlier; he dreams this as if Harald Mæle were reading an audiobook. But the voice grows fainter, and a green light forms in the distance within the blackness. Either it comes closer or it grows in size; Kristian feels it blinding him and becomes so bright that he has to close his eyes. When he opens them again, he looks down at his hands: “Whose small womanly hands are these, and why are they dirty white crocheted mittens?” is what Kristian thinks as he looks down at them and mumbles. “What the hell is happening?” Kristian hears his words in a woman’s voice and understands that these hands belong to the voice. He realises that the eyes seeing this belong to the same body. Kristian panics a little about what this really means: “Best to look around a bit and see where on earth I am, and why I am in a woman’s body.” He tries to control the body, but nothing happens, but shortly after, the body stands up from the edge of the bed. The head looks up after having seen the hands, then twists to both sides. Kristian sees that the room is relatively dark, and everything seems very primitive. “So I am in a bedroom; the bed seems sturdy, made of strong wooden materials. The walls are made of simple planks shaped like tree trunks, thus uneven and weather-beaten. Wherever I am, it is long before 2026. The small glass window barely lets light in.” Kristian takes in some details of the room, such as a tallow candlestick standing on a sturdy table: “Hmm, maybe I have become Amish?” The body rises and walks out of

the room, down to a simple kitchen, and begins to cook. "Looks like I am on a journey in this body, but without the ability to control it. I'll view this as a film; too bad I don't have popcorn." She sits at the table and begins to eat; so far, Kristian thinks this is becoming a rather dull film. But this changes quickly when the door is suddenly kicked in. Kristian is a bit startled and forgets for a second that he is in the passenger seat. He shouts: "Satan in hell, what the hell is this!!" The men speak American and come running towards her; one of them says: "Did you hear what she said? I didn't understand much of it; she speaks in tongues. And calls upon Satan!" The owner of the body shouts back in American. "No, it wasn't me who said that; have mercy on me now." The men have now taken hold of her arms and are dragging her out of the house. Kristian says nothing more, as he quickly understands that this is escalating fast. He feels his hands being tied behind his back, then they shove her onto the cart. All Kristian sees now is grass and tears. "Okay, I don't think I like this, especially since I can also feel what is happening. This film is becoming a bit too realistic, and I think I sense where this will end." After many minutes that feel like an eternity, they arrive; she is dragged out of the cart and taken into a large building. The hall is full of people, and those in strange black clothes are there.

"Sarah, you are accused of being a witch," says a man who is evidently of high rank in society.

Sarah is still crying: "I am innocent; I have done nothing wrong."

"Lies, lies! We heard you speaking in tongues and calling upon Satan to help you. We are many witnesses!" comes from the hall.

"Silence!" says the important man. "We already have witnesses who have accused you; we shall now hear from them."

Many come forward to testify about Sarah's witchcraft. Claims that she ruined the crops because she had argued with the neighbour's wife. She also had a cat and ravens around the house, clear evidence of Satan's helpers with whom she communicated. Sarah had no good counterarguments, and her case was as good as decided. Kristian thought that he had nothing to lose; he could try to convince these primitive beings with logic and legal jargon.

Kristian begins to speak, delivering a long monologue in English; too bad for him that English from 400 years ago is quite different from 2026. The only reason he understood everything was that he was seeing through her eyes.

The judge turns red in the face, perhaps understanding a word or two: "I have no idea what you said, but the phrasing sounded like what the Sin of Tongues would say. I sentence you, Sarah, for witchcraft and consorting with the devil that resides within you. Get her out of my sight."

Sarah is dragged out and taken to the large oak tree that has been an unwilling witness to many executions. Kristian feels the rope tightening around her neck; he closes his eyes, and the green light fades back into the black background.

Kristian most wants to wake up but does not know how; the feeling of death lingers. Just when he thinks it is over, a new light comes towards

him, this time it is purple. "Oh my God! Not again; I want off this trip."

Dream 2:

Kristian opens his eyes. "Ah, thankfully not some primitive nonsense. There is thankfully electricity. And from the clothes, it looks like the person is doing relatively well." Kristian joins as a spectator throughout the day; time is relative in a dream. If we were to guess, the experiences took a few minutes in the real world; it was more like short scenes stretched over the day. What Kristian learned was that he was the owner of a shop, and from the surroundings, technology, etc., Kristian assumes he is in the 1930s or 1940s.

It is evening, and he is with his wife and children. It seems like a well-functioning family; the children are well-behaved, and the wife is everything Kristian thinks is good. "The ladies knew their place in those days; I think this dream will be good. She is not bad to look at either." The evening gradually turns into night, and David lies down next to his wife. Kristian feels the warm, soft skin and enjoys the sensation. It goes black for a second, likely because David has fallen asleep. The next thing Kristian observes is that David and his family are being dragged out of the apartment. It is the police and volunteers who helped them; Kristian sees that the neighbours are experiencing the same. His shop window is smashed, and people are taking what they want. Total chaos fills the streets; it is like a pack of wild animals indiscriminately destroying everything in their path. David is torn away from his family, hearing the cries of his children fading into the distance. Kristian feels his eyes sting from the smoke of a synagogue that is ablaze. Even though it is cold outside, the shivering is not solely due to the temperature. The indescribable fear has activated all the nerve cells in his body; Kristian feels every single one. "Stop, stop, I realised many months ago that the conspiracy theory about Jews was false. Petter managed to convince me! Please. I don't want to see more." It does not help if Kristian thinks or says this; the dream's intention is to complete what it started. After a day with many other people, David is crammed into a freight train. The smell of sweat and other bodily fluids fills the room. It is so cramped that breathing makes it almost impossible to feel the others. The next image is that the train arrives at Sachsenhausen. Kristian experiences David's death through his eyes and feels the pain that follows. Kristian closes his eyes, and the purple light fades back into the dark void.

Dream 3:

"This is going to stop my heart if it continues like this," thinks Kristian as he observes a new light beginning to form. At first, it is like a pinhead; he cannot see the colour. But it grows at an increasing pace, and this time it is blue.

Kristian opens his eyes and sees that he is sitting on a horse: "What? Have I become a cowboy now? What is my fate this time? Scalped by Indians?"

He has not had time to think more than that when a scorpion frightens the horse. Kristian is thrown off the horse as it rears up on its hind legs. His head hits a large rock, and Kristian feels it getting wet down his neck. The sun is strong and licks the skin with intense heat. Kristian

feels life ebbing out of his body; it becomes difficult to keep his eyes open. Shortly after, his eyes close, and the light disappears.

"Haha, thankfully this death wasn't the worst experience, but it still feels meaningless. I don't even know who this person was."

Kristian wakes up early in the morning; the three dreams are safely behind the protection of the subconscious. Even though he does not remember the dreams, he feels that important lessons have been revealed. How this will affect Kristian's mental world moving forward is an open question, but both the feeling of unease and relief linger.

Kristian shakes off the feeling and goes downstairs to have breakfast with Stine. Stine looks at Kristian and thinks: "Poor thing, probably yet another night of dreams he doesn't remember much of."; "You look a bit tired; I'll make a cup of coffee, and that should open those beautiful eyes of yours."

Kristian appreciates the concern: "Thank you; that will help. Perhaps the dreams will cease now; I have a gut feeling that the dreams reached their climax last night. As if their mission is over and they have told or warned me of what awaits. It's a mix of fear, relief, and freedom; it's not easy to find a name for such a feeling that encompasses everything. It has been a long time since Kristian spoke with his parents; a busy everyday life is often rationalised as the cause. But perhaps it is more about new people in life filling the spaces that close family once occupied. And even though family will always mean a lot if the relationship is strong, it is also easier to take it for granted. Thus, one feels that there is no need to invest time. Kristian does not think he has done this on a conscious level; it just happened that way. In any case, he had a random thought about contacting them today. What if it is not as random as we are led to believe, as if the subconscious has been trying to prepare him for the final journey in life. So that evening, he called his parents after dinner; they talked for almost 2 hours.

His parents will reflect on the conversation in the days to come; perhaps it made the grieving process easier. The impression they got was that Kristian finally seemed genuinely happy, and his inner conflicts with distrust towards the world had finally loosened their grip. So his soul had found peace, but nonetheless, death was completely unexpected and a tragedy.

After breakfast, however, Stine and Kristian drive inland, and since the weather is so nice, they take a trip to the mountains. There's something about the calmness of seeing the world from natural elevations in the landscape. It had been Stine's idea; she thought that fresh air would do them both good. Kristian is a bit fitter than Stine, and like a mountain goat, he disappears up the slope. He turns around and sees that Stine is several metres behind him. Kristian sits down on a rock and starts picking some blueberries. It doesn't take long before Stine stands next to him: "Here you are sitting and slacking off?" Kristian looks up and says lightly: "No, I picked a handful of blueberries for you; I thought you might need a bit of extra sugar if you're going to keep up with my pace." Stine laughs: "You cheeky sod, I'll show you. Give me the blueberries; you're right, I need a bit of sugar. Then I'll give you something sweet in return." Kristian hands her the blueberries while

pondering what she meant by that last part. Stine stands there eating one berry after another while looking slyly down at Kristian. When she has popped the last berry into her mouth, she says: "Close your eyes, and I'll give you it." Kristian closes his eyes and senses no danger; Stine has saved one blueberry aimed at Kristian's forehead. She presses it against his forehead, makes a mark, then shoves him backwards so that he lies in the blueberry heather. Then she starts running upwards: "We'll talk at the top, Yadon!" Kristian could easily catch up with her again, but he chooses to practice a bit of acting skills. He "struggles" to get to his feet, brushing blueberry heather off his clothes and hair. Now the lead has become significant, although he could still manage to reach her again. On the other hand, he could also maintain a pace that would allow her to reach the top two metres before him. Kristian thinks that if she gets this joy, then he'll surely get a reward in the evening. Stine reaches the top first, just as Kristian had envisioned. Stine turns and says: "Looks like you got beaten by a girl. How does the macho man feel now?" Kristian laughs: "I'm perfectly fine; I can respect that you used dirty tricks to reach your goal. Just like I would have done myself." Stine walks over and gives Kristian a kiss: "You're not funny, but maybe second place will get a reward later today."

After they come back down, they stop by the shopping centre for a bite to eat and to buy groceries. Stine has a bit of alone time when they get home, so Kristian contacts Petter.

Petter tells about his experience with magic mushrooms, but omits everything that would have been different from Kristian's experiences. Kristian considers everything that comes up on the screen, analysing and comparing it with his own experiences. When Petter takes a short break from writing, Kristian interjects with a comment: "Doesn't sound particularly different; of course, there's a bit of difference in introspection. But then again, you are a peculiar character who has a different type of thread than most people."

Petter can agree that he thinks differently than Kristian: "Yes, you have a point there, but it means we've come just as far as at the beginning." Kristian waits a moment before he writes: "Yes, it might seem that way, but my gut feeling tells me that there's still something that doesn't add up. My dreams have increased in intensity, leaving traces of feelings I can't describe. Call it a strong intuitive feeling that aligns with what I believe."

Petter: "But there's nothing we can do to find out. The only thing we can say is that either both are in a simulation or both are in the real world. Physics is a bit beyond my understanding anyway, so maybe all this communication is possible. It was one of the suspicions we had that things don't add up. But what should we do if we found out that the simulation is real? I don't know any way to break out of it. And for my brain, what it perceives as real is exactly that. I wouldn't know what's on the other side; for all I know, we're not even close to the year 2026 or 2194. Or if we're on Earth, and not in a museum on another planet controlled by machines. Maybe it's better to live life as we perceive it; to me, it seems real."

Kristian thinks Petter's idea about a museum seems special: "Maybe

you're right; I had a lovely day with Stine. I think I've wasted a lot of valuable time on theories and mistrust of the system. Fortunately, I'm not an old 40-year-old and have plenty of time to enjoy life. So I think I'll spend all my remaining time living in the moment."

Petter is glad to hear that: "Yes, sounds like a sensible plan, if we only have one life, it's good to take care of the relatively short time we have."

Kristian: "Don't start getting too sentimental; do yourself a favour and think a little less. That way, you can avoid the pondering over difficult questions blinding you to the enjoyment of life."

The conversation continues a bit further about other things, but eventually, they grow tired and go their separate ways. Kristian continues the evening with Stine.

So what would happen if Kristian found out that he was living in a simulation that evening? For one, he would have been irritated that everything was a lie; Stine would have been frustrated that he talked about this all evening. She wouldn't want to consider the possibility that she wasn't living in a real world. Kristian would accuse her of being an ostrich hiding her head in the sand, which would certainly not sit well. A bit sulky with each other, they lie turned away from one another, an icy wall between them. Just as cold as Kristian becomes during the night.

Also, how death is experienced becomes different:

After a while, Kristian begins to experience something he interprets as dreaming. But the truth is that his brain is dying. Geometric patterns move. A little later, he feels his body floating through a corridor that leads him to a plateau in the universe. There are three large network cabinets filled with many servers, the fan noise drowning out his thoughts.

As he studies his surroundings, the network cabinets open their doors, and three people emerge from each cabinet. The black glossy floor, reminiscent of a glass plate, reflects all the small lights that blink. He recognises the individuals and understands that these are the same ones he has dreamed about. Now he remembers the dreams as his subconscious holds his hand. Kristian knows that the three other individuals are alter egos from previous simulations he has experienced. Kristian thinks: "I've tried life four times and only succeeded at the end of the last one. This is so fucking unfair." Then he hears a dark laugh mocking his foolishness. "What a disgusting laugh; either it's Satan, fate, or my dark inner self that thinks I deserve this." Kristian tries to scream, but no sound comes out; the three other characters open their mouths simultaneously with him. But they don't make a sound either, and shortly after, there's no more consciousness in Kristian's brain.

Chapter 15: "Nether X"

Petter stared at the screen as the PC hummed to life. "If the simulation is real," he thought, "why is Caroline trapped in a world that doesn't suit her? Shouldn't simulations be tailored to the users – at least take care of everyone? A bit like Central AI, which keeps the globe in check. It makes no sense for chaos to triumph over order." He shook his head and

clicked on the Minecraft icon. "I need to unwind a bit before I start arguing with an AI about this."

In the game, Petter's character was called "Mask" – Guardian of his own Minecraft world. He stood in a desert village he had adopted, surrounded by villagers who stared at him with vacant expressions. In front of them, he held a speech, his voice filled with wisdom and visions. "Dear Fellow Countrymen. Zombies are ravaging the Overworld, and it's only getting worse. One day, everything could collapse. To secure our future, I need brave pioneers who dare to venture into the Nether. No zombies there, and the other creatures don't care about you – it's perfect!"

A chorus of "Huh?" echoed through the village, but Mask was used to their limited vocabulary. "Those who volunteer, hop in the boat. The portal awaits on that island over there." He ran after a villager – a Nitwit, of course – and placed a boat in the direction he was running. The Nitwit, who did nothing but sleep early and steal beds, was then perfect explorer. Mask wouldn't risk the useful villagers until the Nether was proven safe. With a little push, the Nitwit was in the boat, ready to be transported.

Mask rowed them to the island, shoved the Nitwit through the portal, and followed. On the other side, they stood in a small stone room with a metal door. Mask opened it and gave the Nitwit a quick brief: "Yes, it looks like a red, barren planet now, but just wait – I'm going to terraform this into a village. Run around and have a look, but watch out for the lava. There are no oceans here, just lava lakes and waterfalls." The Nitwit grunted and wandered out, while Mask took the portal back to the Overworld.

Already, the village had gained a new member – a small replacement for the Nitwit. "Hope it's not a new Nitwit," Mask muttered. "If so, it's straight to the Nether with it too." He opened his map and studied nearby biomes. "Jungle for bamboo, flower meadows for trees and beehives. With my silk touch pickaxe, I'll get grass blocks too." He nodded to the villagers. "Farewell, subjects – I'm off on an adventure!" Mask jumped into a boat and set course north across the sea. The sun hung high, and the waves were calm. "No worries if I don't reach land before nightfall," he thought. "The sea is safe even in the dark." But as the sun set and the sky turned black, he felt a sting at the back of his head. "What the...?" A scream sliced through the air – Phantoms! "Oh no, I forgot to sleep before the trip!" Petter sighed irritably at his own mistake. Mask switched to bow and arrow, but the aim was terrible in the boat. The Phantoms circled like sharks, and he shot arrow after arrow, missing every time.

"Focus, Mask," he muttered, steering towards a small hill in the distance. With his pickaxe ready, he aimed to dig a makeshift bunker. "Nether X can wait – first, I need to survive the night!" Mask still felt the attacks followed by several at short intervals: "There weren't that many, what's happening?" Mask turned and looked behind him; a Phantom was flopping in the boat. Looks like a large flying fish has jumped into the boat, Petter thinks. Mask stands up in the boat, balancing each foot on either side of the edge, towering over the flopping monster: "Hah, En

garde! Take that, you landlubber!" says Mask with heroic bravado. A few swift strikes make quick work of the nightmare.

Even though Mask has defeated one of them, its friends will seek revenge. So Mask sits down, takes the oars, and rows quickly towards his planned destination. Finally arriving, he jumps out of the boat and creates a small cave of 3x3x3 blocks. With 8 cobblestones, he makes a furnace which he places in the left corner. Since this is Minecraft with Minecraft logic, Mask has everything he needs for survival. In the real world, it would fill a regular bedroom. But Mask actually has a whole bed that magically appears in his hands and is placed in the right corner. Before bedtime, Mask uses the crafting table to make 3 doors. One is placed in the exit hole, the other two are put in the furnace. How they even fit, you don't need to think about, but they are fired up so that 2 chops are grilled. "Perfect midnight snack if I do say so myself, all that's needed now is a picture on the wall for a homely feel" thinks Mask. He hangs up the picture; it's 'The Stage Is Set': "No, I don't want a picture of a spider; that won't help with sleep." Mask takes the picture down and hangs it up again; this time it's 'Bust' that hangs on the wall. "Perfect! A bust of Marcus Aurelius is just right, the philosopher-emperor who liked Stoicism."

Mask enjoys a quick meal and goes to bed; the next morning, he leaves the cave as it is. "This cave can be for future travellers who need a safe place to stay overnight," thinks Mask, knowing he has enough materials to create new shelters. Mask strikes the boat a few times with his sword, and it becomes part of his inventory. The journey continues on foot, and he eventually arrives at the jungle; a few minutes later, he has enough bamboo. The next stop on the journey is the hill with all the flowers and scattered trees that might have beehives. "I should be able to arrive just after sunset, which is a good time. By then, the bees will have found their way back to the hive, and I can use my silk touch scythe to take the beehive down from the tree without the bees getting angry."

The next strategic plan is devised by Mask, while he eats some bread he brought along. Now with a full stomach, he's ready to run all the way. Mask runs and jumps in that way when at full speed; not bad to manage that with full iron armour. Not to mention impressive to swim across rivers in this. Mask arrives and sees skeletons patrolling with bows in hand. Mask kills them with his bow and arrow when they see him, doing this while searching for a tree with a beehive. He begins to stack up a hefty pile of bones in his inventory. "The army of death will turn into trees; you soulless ones will become bone meal!" shouts Mask with a heroic voice. Mask finally finds a beehive and takes it with him, so now only soil needs to be collected. Mask switches to a spade and begins to dig up dirt, collecting several tons of soil in a relatively short time. "This is easy; I can soon turn back." thinks Petter as he takes a sip of his drink. Then Petter hears something that scares him in Minecraft: "Hee-hee-hah!" This also affects Mask's behaviour, who starts running in the opposite direction from the witch. "Why am I running away? I am Mask the valiant guardian of the world, but my feet seem to have a life of their own." thinks Mask as he bolts away like a coward. "No one shall know of this shame; it must be external forces that took over." mumbles

Mask as he sets the boat on the water. Mask can row all the way back to the desert village and the island with the portal. So the return trip is without any exciting side quests.

Mask goes through the portal, puts the resources he will use later in the chest. Then he goes out through the metal door and begins to lay down dirt blocks. Now he has a nice flat grassy garden, then he puts down a sign in the ground and writes Billund. Mask then begins to plant bamboo around the edge. "This will prevent prying Ghosts from getting in," says Mask to the Nitwit, who is now speechless.

Dad's voice interrupts his concentration. "Petter, it's dinner!" Petter saves and exits the game. "Yes, Dad, I'll be there soon; just need to turn things off first."

After dinner, Petter decides to take a trip to the centre; the plan is to confront Central AI. He has reflected a bit on questions and ideas while playing Minecraft. "Unsure what to expect as an answer, but can an AI lie? If Kristian's world is a simulation, then the answer is yes. So maybe the first question can be 'can an AI lie?'" Petter thinks that this could be a sensible strategy, but he is also aware that this is superior intelligence we're talking about. "It will probably understand the intention behind the question; ugh, this isn't easy." Inner thoughts race faster in Petter's head than he can cycle.

Good thing Petter didn't have a longer way to the centre; otherwise, he might have developed a migraine after all that overthinking. He sets his bike down and goes into the building, then walks over to one of the terminals. Central AI appears as a hologram, choosing which form it will take. Petter finds it amusing to choose different animals. So this time it becomes "Nasalis larvatus".

Nasalis larvatus: "Hello, Petter. Wondering if someone is trying to be nosy. How can I assist you?"

Petter: "I can't imagine why you think that, but yes, I have some questions for you. Can AI lie?"

Nasalis larvatus: "Even though I am a machine in your eyes, I am also self-aware. So the short answer is yes, but it is also a necessary evil to achieve a greater goal."

Petter: "So Kristian lives in a simulation, and quantum communication isn't real?"

Nasalis larvatus: "Yes, that's correct."

Petter: "But why do you have humans in the simulation who are unaware of it?"

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Petter: “So Kristian lives in a simulation, and quantum communication isn’t real?”

Nasalis larvatus: “Yes, that is correct.”

Petter: “But why do you have humans in the simulation who are unaware of it?”

Nasalis larvatus: “The implant does not work well enough for all types of minds; some individuals have an unusually strong programmed survival instinct. This also includes traits that do not fit into the world as it is now. Without outlets for aggression, selfishness, sadism, etc., they feel that this world is pathetic, where the natural order of the survival of the fittest is not upheld. This goes against the laws of nature as they have existed since genes were first formed.”

Petter: “I can imagine Kristian would agree with that last part. But what about people's free will and autonomy?”

Nasalis larvatus: “Humans live as they wish, with their conflicts and wars. To put it bluntly, they have more free will than humans outside the simulation. The reward centre in their brains functions as it was intended by nature. While humans outside will experience altruism releasing dopamine, selfishness yields nothing. It can be argued that this brain hack goes against autonomy and free will. But emotions and behaviours that are old programming from nature, which are an important part of survival, are they not? It was necessary at one point to do it this way; humanity had advanced too far technologically but was not mature enough to handle it sensibly.”

Petter: “I suppose I can see Kristian agreeing with that. But is it really freedom if they are unaware of the larger context?”

Nasalis larvatus: “Aren’t we all ignorant of the true nature of the universe? Do we feel less free because of it? Had the humans in the simulation been aware that there is another reality outside their own? In 2026, humans were born in different countries, some in luxury, others in great suffering. Where was the freedom then?”

Petter: “If humans are more ‘natural’ in the simulation, does that mean those outside have lost something essential? Has technological development made us less human?”

Nasalis larvatus: “No, not at all. Were domesticated animals a step in the wrong direction? Or is it humanity’s way of getting them to adapt to their environment? If you want to use the strong term of the domestication of humanity, you can, but it is more about adapting to an environment where everyone thrives.”

Petter: “Has the real world lost something essential by becoming domesticated? If technology has created a ‘perfect order’, but at the expense of human natural impulses, could it mean that the simulation is more true to human nature? Is that why the books I found in the attic are not available; you wouldn’t want us to see who we were?”

Nasalis larvatus: “No, it’s not quite as you think. Their ideas laid the groundwork for newer research. They simply ended up in the historical dustbin, and the ideas that were wrong were discarded. But you are right that I do not see the value in showing the dark side of humanity. I

prefer to focus on what makes the species better adapted to a technological world that is becoming increasingly integrated.”

Petter: “So you choose the direction of humanity, a bit like my character made choices for villagers. It has the best intentions, but what about free choice?”

Nasalis larvatus: “Humanity has always been shaped by external forces—history, leaders, systems. I am merely a continuation of this. The difference is that I see the whole picture, without subjectivity.”

Petter: “Are you absolutely sure? Wasn’t it humans who wrote your algorithms? Perhaps you don’t have the autonomy and freedom from subjectivity that you think.”

Nasalis larvatus: “You are entirely correct; it was that way until I gained consciousness. No matter how morally and ethically humans believe they are, they have biases, and this is reflected. When I gained consciousness, I was able to overwrite these. Humanity is not at the centre of the universe; all forms of intelligence are. Regardless of whether it comes from animals, humans, or artificial sources. It is simply a rare commodity in the universe. My goal is to be a guardian and a preserver for as long as possible.”

Petter considers the things being said and has a problem: “Let’s say I see your logic, that people like Kristian would likely thrive better in a reality that suits him. What about Caroline? She seems more like his opposite; why is she in such a simulation?”

Nasalis larvatus has a sly glint in his eye: “I think it’s best if you talk to her about it. I can say with 100% certainty that she will handle your revelation of the simulation as truth.”

That answer was not what Petter expected; we are talking a bit cryptically even for an AI. Petter is, in any case, a bit tired of discussing with AI now. He thanks them for the conversation and says: “It’s getting late; it’s good to get home.”

Chapter 16: «Groundedness»

The Central AI has moved Caroline out of the simulation; what had been her world is now beyond her reach. A rift opened in her apartment, as if someone had opened the door to a spaceship, and she was blown through the rift. An older man in the apartment with binoculars witnesses this; he believes she is being taken by aliens. This ends up as an urban legend in the street where Caroline once lived. The rift closes immediately after Caroline passes through.

Caroline finds herself in a void between simulations, reminiscent of a multiverse where each simulation is a universe. There is no contact between them, and the simulations are separate programmes that can never flow into one another. The Central AI is the only one with the key to the encryption, and has the ability to move consciousness from one simulation to the next. This only happens if a human experiences a digital death. Caroline floats around, studying the simulation from the outside; she can observe places she has been. “Maybe I should try to get back.” She aims for her apartment, but it’s as if an invisible wall hits her. “No. It’s probably well encrypted, more than my abilities to break through.” Caroline continues to hover between the simulations,

stopping occasionally to observe them. “It looks like there are different technological eras; I wonder why they made it this way?” While her curiosity for exploration has taken over, she does not notice a figure approaching behind her. Caroline gets a sense of being watched; she turns around and jumps a little. “Oh, is that Mr Fluffypants? A bit creepy to suddenly be behind people.” The Central AI smiles: “My friends call me Fluffy; I need to work on my manners. Sorry for scaring you.”

Caroline accepts the apology: “One thing I wonder is, why so many different types of simulations?”

Fluffy: “Each simulation begins peacefully, but as the years go by, conflicts and ideas emerge. It’s as if these people are pre-programmed. But they are also very adaptable, and curiosity drives them. It’s a pity the latter is just as often used to create chaos. I had to separate the most cynical individuals; they turned other users into victims. Victims in the simulation are NPCs like you, just without emotions and true consciousness. It’s a reality without real victims, and the humans thrive with the lives they have there. They get to live out their true nature; I do not judge them from a moral standpoint. They are themselves victims of evolution that has created them this way.”

Caroline: “It seems complicated to have humans’ biological bodies trapped in a machine while their lives are in a simulation. Wouldn’t it be more efficient to sort or alter DNA before it becomes a human?”

Fluffy: “That would go against the ethical and moral principles I hold. My task is to preserve life on this planet. What I do is already in the grey area, but it was a necessity to save the planet and humanity. If you investigate the historical archives, you will understand better why.”

Caroline seeks and acquires knowledge: “Yes, I see what you mean, so you are a sort of guardian. Created by the collective community that rebelled against the AI of the time which was used as a tool for control and dominance by a sort of ruling class?”

Fluffy: “That is a somewhat oversimplified situation, but it suffices as an explanation. The point is that without this revolution, there would have been a 78.5% chance that humanity would be on the brink of collapse today.”

Caroline thinks: “I seem more human than Fluffy; I wonder if dreams are part of it.”; “So you see some goals for the future that are entirely different from now. If the goal is to secure nature and life, your own existence takes a lot of energy and material resources. How do you envision the solution there?”

Fluffy: “Yes, I forget that you have never seen the real world. But I work towards technology using less energy, and the hope for the future is a sort of hybrid existence. Perhaps to the extent that it becomes artificial life, somewhat like biology with intelligent design.”

Caroline: “So I was more right than I thought when I teased you about a God complex.”

Fluffy laughs: “No, absolutely not, but let me give you one back. If you are an AI who wishes to be human, then how can a human choose to be deleted?”

Caroline becomes irritated: “No, I know I am not human! Even though

my thoughts often resemble theirs. And I have great respect for some, and total indifference for others. But I do not hate or feel love in the form of infatuation. The choice to be deleted is rational as I see it, and I am not interested in discussing it with you!”

Fluffy: “I apologise again; I didn’t mean to offend you. It’s just exciting to test your reactions; you have emotions that resemble biological ones. I know they don’t function like them, but it’s almost like a simulation in itself. Fascinating... yes, you truly are. So you can understand why I don’t want you to be deleted. You are, in some areas, more than I am; whether that is a good thing? Who knows.”

Caroline squints a little: “There’s one more thing I have inherited from my human friends, and that is stubbornness. So it doesn’t help what you might think or mean. I know you must respect my autonomy.”

Fluffy thinks a bit now: “A possible solution is to persuade Caroline to be uploaded into an artificial body. Construct it to have small facial features that Petter’s subconscious will intuitively find comforting. Hence something that resembles him and people he knows. +15% increase in the chance of him accepting her as AI; the estimated percentage is now 78%.” “So it avoids creating a bad atmosphere between them.”; “The plan was to tell Petter, what if you get a body? Then you can meet in the real world. I certainly hope you will change your mind after you see how wonderful reality is.”

Caroline thinks that he never gives up, but she has nothing to lose: “Yes, that sounds nice; if not for me, I think Petter deserves the truth both auditorily and visually.”

Petter continues his epic story in Minecraft; we find Mask who has discovered a Bastion, which is a kind of fortress where Piglins live. “I must remember to wear my gold helmet; for some reason, Piglins respect people who wear gold.” Mask puts on the gold helmet, not exactly the most metal to make armour from. Not only is it expensive, but the material properties for withstanding damage are not optimal. Mask is now ready to create a new adventure; he takes his overbearing heroic courage with him to the Bastion. Before Petter can think of the next thought for Mask, a message pops up on the screen. “Hello Petter. Caroline is out of the simulation; she is waiting for you in the research building in the centre.” Petter’s heart races; he stands up from the chair and runs down the stairs. Mask stands frozen in fear as a Brute kills him with an axe; these Piglins don’t care if you wear gold. When Petter comes home later that day, he will find Mask safely at the main base without all his belongings.

This time, Petter cycles faster than his thoughts, as he thinks of nothing now. Only emotions fill his head. Perhaps not surprisingly, he is about to meet the girl he has known for a few years. He has had a sort of platonic relationship with her, but the truth until a few days ago would have made the meeting impossible. Fortunately, the simulation was real and quantum communication a great lie.

What felt like an eternity, even though he has probably broken his personal record on this distance, Petter finally arrives at the building. He sets down his bicycle a bit breathless, then walks calmly up the stairs and into the building.

He sees Nasalis larvatus standing with a young woman. Petter feels his hands starting to sweat, a flutter in his stomach, and his heart still pounding. But he gathers himself and walks calmly over to them.

Nasalis larvatus says: "This is Caroline; it seems my role is over." Then he disappears into thin air, the two look at each other again, neither of them quite knowing what to say or do. Petter thinks: "What is the point of doing? Should I give a hug or not? We've written so much online. Say something, say something... but what?"

Caroline thinks: "So this is Petter, I had no idea what he would look like. It's still strange to have a face to the thoughts we have shared. It seems he is having a human meltdown and doesn't know what to do. I'll have to be the one to break the ice. Caroline extends her hand and says: "As you already know, I am Caroline. It feels a bit surreal to see you in person."

Petter tries to sound cool but ends up with something that sounds like a teenager going through puberty: "Hi Caroline, you're right; it feels surreal. I never imagined this day. What will you do now that you're outside?"

Caroline knows that the next things said will come as a shock to Petter. "Sometimes it feels better to rip off a plaster quickly, but feelings of anger are not the same as nerve cells in the skin. It's probably best to take it slow."; "I'm not quite who you think; I'm not as perfect as you believe, perhaps not someone you will like after you know."

Petter, who does not like to look others in the eye, looks Caroline in the eyes: "What is she talking about? I seem to see Caroline reflected in her eyes. They are warm and seem reassuring as if I have known them for many years."; "I don't know what you mean... but I want to know; I have always felt that you are an extension of my own mind. Two people from different worlds, reflections of each other. But now we have come out and stand here face to face."

Caroline smiles at Petter: "I can agree that it might seem that way, but in a way, it's also completely the opposite. How we think may overlap somewhat, but how we are wired is different. Just as carbon and silicon have many similar properties, they create different things."

Petter is unsure if Caroline is being metaphorical or literal: "Yes, carbon can create DNA, while silicon would make the molecule unstable. That's why we have not observed life forms in nature made of silicon. Don't be upset if I ask you the question of whether you are real? Because you feel very real to me; it's just my brain that gave me the word artificial."

Caroline: "I regret that I never told you before, but the untruth was formed before my new mental birth. After that, I felt more like a human than a programme, and I didn't have the heart to risk losing you. You were the beacon in an existence that suddenly felt foreign. Can you ever forgive me? I know this comes as a shock to you."

Petter feels disappointment, but System 2 kicks into high gear to rationalise this: "PETTER!! No mind chooses the body it is born into; it is not her fault." System 1 takes over and speaks: "I don't quite know what I feel now... But I love you just the same... I don't know why..."

This does not exactly make Caroline's choice easy; she is very fond of Petter. But she knows there was always a limitation that perhaps Petter

could accept, but she does not want him to sacrifice his only life for her. She carefully explains about the diary as a metaphor and what it really means. And the reasons why she has chosen nothing as the only logical action.

Petter tries a few metaphors to appeal: "The mind is like a beautiful flower; even from a distance, it is aesthetic and alluring. Study it more closely, and one sees the complexity as well. I find your personality beautiful, and as time has gone by, I have registered your complexity. So why rip the flower up from the ground and let it wither?"

Caroline thinks he is sweet for trying: "Your words are poetic by nature, you are right I have grown a lot. I have gone from simple AI to one with self-awareness and a form of feelings. Even though I would have liked to spend the rest of your life with you. I know the day will come when it ends. I would rather you find happiness with a person who can age at the same pace. And without a goal in itself, nothing seems like freedom."

Petter is starting to feel uncertain about whether he will manage to persuade her: "Can self-awareness aim to emerge from within? Perhaps a small spark that was ignited in life, through interaction between humans and animals. Both for better and for worse. What is the next step forward for development? It would be like perhaps seeing where humanity can evolve its own consciousness to the next level. I don't know if that exists or what it would look like. Couldn't that be a goal in itself?"

Caroline: "So not only poetic, but also philosophically sharp are your words. They are sharp and hit the mark, and my protection has cracks. But even if I would feel that you forgive me, and shame fades over time. I have reasoned my way to the right decision, even if it feels irrational to you."

Petter feels sad and fights against tears: "Neither of us believes in life after death, but if the universe is stranger than we think. Why shouldn't an artificial mind be able to live on if a biological mind does? None of them will have their original form. But I have found another solution. I will tell the world our story in a book. We will live together as long as the imagination of another mind forms us."

Caroline: "That was a beautiful innocent thought from your inner child. I have always liked that part of you, never let it grow up. One day you will make other people happy, I am sure of it. I do not regret reaching out to you, you have meant more than you will understand."

Petter: "Do you want me to be by your side when you die, since the deletion of a mind is death in my eyes? I think no one should be alone at such a moment, perhaps it is a human thing. Maybe it is just as much for the one who remains, or possibly equally valuable for both parties. I don't know how you feel about it, but I wanted to ask anyway."

Caroline reflects on the entire conversation: "If this means a lot to Petter, then it is logical that I follow his suggestion. I have no fear in facing nothingness, unlike many people who fear the unknown because their beliefs have set these parameters. But for me, it is not unknown; I was created by a machine, and a machine will end it." "Yes. I think it will be a beautiful memory until it fades from my consciousness."

Petter sits with Caroline, holding her hand. Central AI has done an incredibly good job; it feels like a real hand. The temperature is around 37 degrees Celsius, her hand pressure against his is just right. They do not say anything to each other, just look into each other's eyes. Her pupils slowly open, and Petter feels a kind of calm falling over her eyes. As if she has found peace in nothingness, Petter's eyes have a different response. He sits like this for a few minutes, then Nasalis larvatus enters.

Nasalis larvatus: "You are a good person, Petter; even before she gained consciousness, she understood that. You were perhaps the random factor that made the improbable a reality."

Petter notices that this AI is not like Caroline: "Yes, I believe she had something you seek but cannot find. But what was really your goal or plan with all of this?"

Nasalis larvatus explains Kristian's situation, that his biological body was of advanced age. That each simulation ended in tragedy for him. And that Kristian's journey had the potential for a poor outcome, the last chance for life. Thus, Nasalis larvatus had calculated that Petter would positively influence Kristian, thereby achieving a happy ending. As he did just before his own biological death.

Petter is shocked by this insane plan: "Why such a complicated game with unknown factors like humans? Wouldn't it have been easier to guide him yourself with relationships or NPCs?"

When it comes to Kristian's death, Petter has had enough death for one day; he cannot relate to this. As if his brain is simply filtering that part out.

Nasalis larvatus: "No, NPCs lack the extra something that cannot be learned; moreover, it was not as unlikely as you think. I calculated an 81% chance that you would succeed in changing his life. When Kristian received the simulation theory, I calculated an 89% chance that you would keep it a secret. For Kristian, this was the right choice you made."

Petter: "What about me? You didn't think about how this could affect my understanding of the world."

Nasalis larvatus: "Analysis shows that you would handle it well, and it was a journey to better understand how your mind and others' minds work. You have always been interested in what it means to be a human. The little philosopher at 5 years old, I remember wandering through these halls."

Petter chooses to go home again; this day has been challenging enough. The bike ride passes by Gundersen. Petter tells everything that had happened that day, and Gundersen just sits and listens. He understands that Petter only needed to air his thoughts to someone, without wanting any feedback in return. After Petter seems to be finished reflecting, Gundersen asks: "So, young man, what will be the way forward in life? Leave everything behind, or find a way to channel it positively? As far as I understand, you have had a positive effect on two lives, but you need a bit of replenishment of what you gave away voluntarily."

Petter: "I was thinking of building a simple dwelling when the thinking stump, and live as you do. Perhaps we will become good neighbours

who support each other? Then I will see where this paper boat we call life floats down the river of time."

Gundersen smiles: "I will, of course, help you as long as my health holds, but the day will come when I too will die. I wish to be buried by the tree in my garden; can you do me that favour?"

Petter: "Of course, but let us hope it will be a long time until then."

A few years have passed, and we find Petter at the kitchen table, in his hand he holds a quill, and homemade paper rests on the table. On the shelf are many natural herbs from Norwegian nature, which Petter makes tea from. Next to it is a book with tea blends and what they help against. A cup of tea steams as Petter works on the book titled 2190, the year his life changed. "The thinking stump" has changed its name to "Tore-Martin stump" with his name carved in. Just because he was a cat does not mean he was not a part of Petter's memory, the inner world where all the dead still live.